University of Alberta

Communication Patterns in Intimate Relationships:

An Attachment Perspective

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Counselling Psychology

Department of Educational Psychology

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2007

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Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32951-1
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-32951-1

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Abstract

Communication is an important issue for couples, as well as a priority topic for marital therapy research. Attachment styles have also been shown to have an impact on communication in couples. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of communication patterns and attachment/intimacy of partners in distressed intimate relationships. As well, the experience of couples counselling for these partners was explored to determine what aspects of therapy were perceived as helpful in improving their communication and strengthening their attachment bonds to one another. A basic interpretive qualitative inquiry method was used and data analysis was guided by suggestions regarding qualitative research by Merriam (2002), Lanigan (1992), and Patton (2002). Participants included the partners of five couples in distressed intimate relationships who have previously participated in marital therapy. Each partner was interviewed separately so as to feel open in discussing his or her own experience of the intimate relationship and couples counselling.

Themes identified those aspects of communication that the partners of the couples described as creating barriers to communication, as well as what contributed to more effective communication. Those behaviours that created barriers to the couple's attachment bond and those behaviours that created closeness and connection were also identified by the participants. As well, themes arose regarding those aspects of marital therapy that the partners perceived as being helpful or not helpful in improving their communication or attachment bonds to one another. The findings were then placed in context of the existing literature in these topic areas. Lastly, implications for counselling couples dealing with communication issues, considerations of the study, and suggestions for future research were discussed.

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people I would like to acknowledge for their support and guidance throughout the process of completing this dissertation. My sincerest gratitude is given to my supervisor, Dr. Len Stewin, for providing me with ongoing support and assistance throughout this process. I would also like to express my gratefulness to the other members of my supervisory committee, Dr. Robin Everall and Dr. Christina Rinaldi, for their insightful guidance and feedback, as well as reviewing material in such a timely fashion. As well, I would like to thank my 10 participants who graciously shared their experiences and made this research project possible.

I would like to send a heartfelt thank-you to my parents, who provided me with continuous support and motivation throughout this educational experience and for instilling in me the hope I needed to carry on until the end. Their reminders about the value of education and future opportunities have always left me feeling inspired. I would also like to thank my brother for the use of his office supplies and for hassling me until I finished. Lastly, I would like to thank my extended relatives who continued to show an interest in my schooling and my many friends who have been there for me in so many ways and who inspired me to finish strong.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Individuals often define themselves in terms of their previous experiences and their relationships with other people. Yet, theorists and researchers alike have debated the meaning of the term "relationship" for decades (VanderVoort & Duck, 2000). Although some scholars simply label the term as an association or involvement between persons (Stewart, 1998), others believe that any description of a relationship represents the inherent suppositions, theories, or beliefs about that relationship (e.g., Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997).

The notion of "intimacy" can be defined as a close personal relationship in which two persons are mutually dependent and engaged in joint actions (Cahn, 1990b). Intimate relationships do not exist in isolation. Rather, it has been suggested that intimate relationships are created, maintained, and changed through the communication that occurs between partners (Burrell & Fitzpatrick, 1990; VanderVoort & Duck, 2000). Other researchers expand upon this point by purporting that through communication, the nature of the relationship is shaped, a relationship identity is constructed, and a negotiation process occurs in which individuals become aligned or misaligned regarding different issues (Cahn & Cushman, 1985; Rogers, 1998). Satisfying intimate relationships have been identified as an important source of people's happiness and sense of meaning in life (Bartholomew, 1990). Conversely, couples who experience more frequent and severe interpersonal conflicts tend to be more unhappy and dissatisfied than couples who engage in fewer and less severe conflicts (Berg-Cross, 2001; Cahn, 1990b).

Communication in relationships can be conceptualized in terms of the system in which it takes place (Cahn & Cushman, 1985; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996). The term "system" refers to a set of components that influence each other. Namely, the system includes a function, structure, and process. The function is what the system does to keep it going; the structure is how the system is put together; and the process refers to the changes the system goes through over time. Satir (1988) used a systems perspective to explain communication in relationships, stating that dysfunctional communication patterns are passed from generation to generation and are learned within the context of the family of origin. Satir labelled her approach the "Human Validation Process," in which individuals in relationships attempt to ask for what they need, experience having their needs met and encourage the process of self-actualization in one another. Some of the goals of this approach include the therapist pointing out significant discrepancies in communication, completing gaps in communication and interpreting messages, and identifying nonverbal communication in relationships (Corey, 1996).

Rationale for the Study

Due to the fact that intimate relationships have a large impact on people's lives, it is important to examine such intimate relationships to determine how interpersonal conflicts can be reduced and minimized, as well as how the overall satisfaction level of each partner's communication experience can be increased. The rationale for studying communication in relationships from an attachment perspective will be presented in this initial chapter, followed by a more in depth review of the literature of these topics in chapter two.

The topic of communication in intimate relationships is valued by the current researcher due to observations and feedback from couples while conducting therapy with them. Communication arose as a primary issue that greatly affected the quality of their relationships and served as a focus throughout the marital therapy process. Not only did these couples self-identify communication as being an issue, it also became quite clear that many couples lacked appropriate communication and conflict resolution skills. Therefore, an urge arose within this researcher to examine these issues so as to provide useful and beneficial help to couples in a counselling context.

Researchers have noted the important link between communication and intimate relationships (Cahn & Cushman, 1985; Parks, 2000; Rogers, 1998). Satir (1988) believed communication to be the greatest single factor affecting a person's health and interpersonal relationships. Siegel (1999) described the communication process as follows:

> When interpersonal communication is 'fully engaged' – when the joining of minds is in full force – there is an overwhelming sense of immediacy, clarity, and authenticity. It is in these heightened moments of engagement, these dyadic states of resonance, that one can appreciate the power of relationships to nurture and to heal the mind. (p. 337)

Therapists have also provided support for studying communication in relationships by reporting that communication problems are common among clients (Vangelisti, 1994), and naming communication as one of the most strongly endorsed priority areas for future marital therapy research (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Despite the increase in marital therapy

research over the past several decades, the question of how to grasp the multiple aspects of the communication process remains relatively unanswered (Rogers, 1998).

The communication process within intimate relationships is affected by many factors, one of which includes the attachment bonds between both partners. Attachment is valued because it is viewed as an interactional process that affects how partners communicate with one another. Attachment theory was coined by Bowlby (1969,1973,1979) to conceptualize the process of humans creating strong affectional bonds to others. Through numerous observations of the behaviour of infants and young children who were separated from their primary caretaker, Bowlby noticed a predictable pattern of emotional reactions to this absence. According to this theory, children, over time, internalize experiences with caretakers in such a way that early attachment relations come to form a prototype for later relationships outside the family. Such "internal working models" determine both how people view themselves, as well as how they view others in relationships. However, while infants are assumed to have an innate tendency to bond with their primary caretakers, adults have some control over the degree to which they become attached to others. Specifically, adults rely more on what motivates them to develop attachments or to distance themselves from others, rather than relying on their instincts alone. Although previous attachment experiences influence later relationships, it appears that adults also have the power to mediate the attachment process in later life.

There currently exists an ongoing debate as to the role that childhood attachment history plays in adult attachment in close relationships. Hazan and Shaver (1994a) sparked this debate by suggesting that the attachment system is developed in childhood and functions relatively the same across the life span. These authors argued that in order

for an attachment to develop between two individuals of any age, there must be a strong force promoting closeness. They noted that the type of attachment pattern two people develop depends largely on the "internal working models" each person has constructed from actual attachment experience, which first begins with primary caretakers. Although they recognized that there are individual differences in the way that children respond to their caretakers, they stated that cognitive and behavioural patterns are both "overlearned" and "resistant to change." Thus, they hypothesized that in adulthood, partners revert back to their childhood notions of attachment.

Several authors have supported the view that childhood attachment experiences are influential in attachment behaviour in adulthood (e.g., Crowell & Waters, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1994a; Kobak, 1994; Scharfe, 2003). For instance, Crowell and Waters (1994) postulated that, "The similarity between the grief responses of infants and adults has been the primary piece of evidence for the attachment behavioural system being an important and powerful component of relationships throughout life" (p. 31). Thus, when the attachment bond is disrupted or lost, both children and adults experience a period of grief, suggesting that support and connection to others remains important throughout life. Several longitudinal studies (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 2001; Klohnen & Bera, 1998) have demonstrated that there is a connection between people's attachment relationships with their parents and their subsequent attachment behaviour in romantic relationships. For example, those with insecure working models of attachment based on their parental relationships were more likely to engage in arguing, they had fewer happy and steady relationships, and they reported insecure working models of attachment in their romantic relationships (e.g., distrusting their partners and having a preference for emotional

distance). In a meta-analysis of attachment representations from "cradle to grave," Scharfe (2003) indicated that much of the research exploring stability of attachment during the first few decades of life has demonstrated that attachment is moderately to highly stable and that when change in attachment occurs, it is likely during life transitions. Sperling, Berman, and Fagen (1992) also noted that while mental representations of attachment are likely to be fairly stable over time, attachment behaviour likely varies in different types of relationships or across only a few points in time within the same type of relationship (i.e., during life transitions). Kobak (1994) also pointed out that early attachments play an important role in personality development. Thus, Kobak argued that those authors who describe attachment as being based on personality constructs alone may be ignoring the complexity of personality and the importance of previous attachment experiences.

On the opposing side of this debate is the notion that adult attachment patterns are based more on individual differences or interactions with others than they are on childhood attachment history. Duck (1994) argued that relationships are complex; and thus, aspects such as social process, gender, and communication must be taken into consideration along with attachment history. Duck noted that a great deal of learning takes place in the transition from infancy to adulthood, which likely has an impact on the way relationships are conceptualized and the attachment style that one possesses. Hendrick and Hendrick (1994) suggested that there are no current data to indicate continuity of attachment from infancy to adulthood, specifically stating that there is an instability of attachment style over time, that caregivers can have an impact on attachment styles, and that a person's temperament or personality can mediate their attachment

history. For instance, Iwaniec and Sneddon (2001) demonstrated that when appropriate support and intervention is provided, or when different circumstances or relationships are experienced, internal working models of attachment from childhood can change. In addition, Lewis (1994) argued that attachment is not a "singular" issue, but rather each child can form multiple attachments that may result in significantly different experiences. Lewis believed that such a variability in experiences can lead to the formulation of a complex social network. Thus, due to the fact that adults have many needs other than attachment and security, it is unrealistic to believe that one significant other to whom they are attached can satisfy all these needs.

Both sides of this debate appear to have merit. Research by Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1979), Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978), and others has undoubtedly demonstrated that children have an innate tendency to form attachments and that they experience anxiety when such bonds are disrupted. Hazan and Shaver (1994a; 1994b) suggested that these early attachment experiences form the foundation for later experiences. Yet, other researchers (e.g., Duck, 1994; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1994) noted the importance of individual/personality factors and other relationship experiences on this process. Mikulincer and Florian (2001) have demonstrated that working models of attachment formed in childhood can become activated in romantic relationships when certain memories are triggered (e.g., having an argument with a spouse that resembles how a person's parents argued). As such, it is possible that people may respond to their partners in a way that is consistent with childhood attachment when a particular situation arises, yet they may still maintain a different working model of attachment in everyday relationship experiences. Belsky and Cassidy (1994) and Levinger (1994) each suggested

that a far more desirable goal is the eventual linkage of these two schools of attachment inquiry. It would appear beneficial to value both sides of this debate and to integrate the ideas to more fully explain the complex issue of attachment in intimate relationships.

Feelings of attachment that partners have toward one another have been described as the "starting point" of the couples' relational system and the foundation for other processes or patterns such as communication and intimacy. Hence, it is important to study communication patterns between couples from an attachment perspective because how the partners relate to one another may be affected by how closely they feel connected or by what they learned in their childhood experiences about the expression of connection. In a review of the attachment literature, Bartholomew (1990) concluded that empirical studies support the utility of studying adult relationships within an attachment perspective because adult attachment styles can be used to explain underlying reasons for people's behaviour. Hence, while it can be beneficial to identify individual attachment styles, it is also important to understand how the attachment styles of partners interact as a system and impact the relationship overall.

Previous research has confirmed that attachment security has been associated with greater relationship satisfaction, as well as better communication and problem-solving skills (Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Cobb & Bradbury, 2003). As well, the use of more effective communication strategies has been found in couples who share more intimacy (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). However, it is unclear what aspects of communication are more frequent among "securely" attached couples or among those couples who share a higher level of intimacy. One trend was noted by Feeney and Collins (2001) where those couples who demonstrated attachment security were associated with more effective,

responsive forms of caregiving. While several measures exist to assess attachment styles, an individual's "attachment model" may change due to experience within a particular relationship or changes in life circumstances (Cobb & Bradbury, 2003). For example, a person who typically feels secure in relationships may experience increased anxiety if his or her partner was unfaithful and attachment security may decrease during such life transitions as having a child or experiencing a death of a family member. Thus, there is a need for further research to explore the concepts of couple communication and attachment together to provide a more comprehensive view of these topics.

There is a great deal still to be learned about the attachment system of adults in intimate relationships (Weiss, 1994). One important aspect of how the attachment system functions is based on how each partner communicates with one another. Duck (1994) suggested that communication between partners can change and modify their attachment system. He also stated that communication in relationships is complex and not simply the "…crankings of two calculating machines that happen to be in the same room and are able to read each other's printouts" (p. 34). Hazan and Shaver (1994a) agreed that focusing on communication in future research is necessary because it would add to attachment theory's conceptualization of the ways in which internal working models of self, relationships, and relationship partners get constructed. Based on a review of several adult attachment studies, Shaver and Mikulincer (2002) proposed a model of the attachment system. These authors suggested that partners are continually monitoring and appraising the following: threatening events, the availability and responsiveness of attachment figures, and the viability of proximity seeking as a means of coping with attachment insecurity and distress.

The present study aimed to integrate the concepts of attachment and communication to further comment on how attachment and communication are experienced in distressed intimate relationships. It appears evident that while research is increasing in this area, a research gap still exists in combining these two concepts together. For instance, Collins (1996) indicated that while it is evident that attachment representational models influence how individuals think, feel, and behave in intimate relationships, the specific processes through which these models operate remain poorly understood. Hazan and Shaver (1994a) also suggested that future research should include a "complete integration of attachment, interdependence, and communication theories" and that "such a union would be fruitful." Hence, the current study explored the communication and attachment/intimacy experiences of partners in distressed relationships to help understand these processes in more depth. The couples therapy experiences of these participants were also explored to gain a better understanding of what aspects of this process helped to improve their communication and strengthen their attachment bonds.

Overview

This initial chapter provided the rationale for studying the concept of communication in distressed intimate relationships from an attachment perspective. Chapter two focuses on a review of the literature. Specifically, factors of relationship quality and stability will be explored. Communication patterns and problems from both the couple's view and the therapist's view will then be examined, followed by the affect of attachment or intimacy bonds on communication in relationships. As well, several types of marital therapy/ marital therapy programs will be explored to determine their

impact on improving the communication skills of couples. Following the review of the literature, the purpose and research questions for this study will be presented.

Chapter three describes the basic interpretive qualitative inquiry methodology that was used in this study, along with a description of the personal biases of the researcher, a description of the participants, how data was collected and analyzed, and the ethical considerations taken into account throughout the study. Chapter four includes an introduction to the couples involved in this study, with information about demographic characteristics, the length/nature of their couples therapy, as well as some impressions of the researcher regarding their relationships. Chapter five presents the findings of the study, including the themes and sub-themes derived from the data. These themes are presented with a combination of direct quotations from the participants and the researcher's interpretation of this information. Lastly, the final chapter places the findings in context of existing literature, along with a discussion of the implications for counselling couples, considerations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Relationship Quality and Stability

Before the issue of communication is explored in greater detail, it is necessary to determine what contributes to relationship satisfaction in order to place communication in a theoretical context. Research in this area has largely been guided by an important theory of marital quality and stability developed by Lewis and Spanier (1979). These researchers define marital quality as the subjective evaluation of the relationship on a number of interpersonal relationship styles and dyadic interactions along a continuum of marital functioning, and marital stability as the durability and permanence of the relationship remaining intact. They noted that all marriages can be placed into one of the following four quadrants: high quality, low quality, high stability, or low stability. Dimensions of marital quality would include areas such as the degree of satisfaction, happiness, conflict, communication, and adaptability, whereas dimensions of marital stability would include areas such as economic and occupational demands, parental duties, expectations of others, and sources of alternative attractions, such as friendships and extramarital affairs. Lewis and Spanier suggested that an individual couple could move within the same quadrant as well as between quadrants over the course of the relationship.

Cole (1985) used the case study method to explore the aspects of high quality marriages in Lewis and Spanier's theory of marital quality. Cole discovered that high quality marriages facilitate both partners having their needs met, whereas low quality marriages frequently fail to facilitate either partner having their needs met. The relationship expectations of partners in high quality marriages were found to be tempered

by reality and shaped by situational factors, whereas partners in low quality marriages were more likely to have unrealistic and inflexible expectations. Larson, Anderson, Holman, and Niemann (1998) also noted that partners who had different expectations and perspectives on their relationship reported lower quality marriages. In addition, Ridley, Wilhelm, and Surra (2001) found that the way that couples think about and react to conflict in their relationships is linked to marital quality. For instance, when both partners endorsed conflict responses (e.g., arguing) leading to a mutual involvement toward the management of the conflict, both partners were likely to assess their relationship positively. As well, having even one partner within the relationship report a tendency to distance during conflict resulted in lower assessments of the quality of the relationship. Thus, it appears important for partners to hold clear and realistic expectations of their relationships, to understand the expectations of their partners, to be mutually engaged in the management of a conflict, as well as to actively attempt to fulfill each other's needs.

The notion of marital stability has often been described in the literature in terms of commitment. Stanley, Lobitz, and Dickson (1999) noted that relationship commitment could be delineated into two areas; namely, constraint commitment and personal dedication. Constraint commitment refers to those issues that constrain couples from ending the relationship, such as a large financial investment, the difficulty of ending a relationship, being unhappy or afraid of life changes, and perceiving a low availability of alternative partners. Personal dedication refers to the degree to which a person wants a relationship to continue over time, the priority that the relationship holds, and the level of satisfaction people experience in doing things for their partners.

It is interesting to point out that when commitment is conceptualized as personal dedication, it is positively associated with marital adjustment, satisfaction, and investment (Acker & Davis, 1992; Stanley et al., 1999). For instance, engaged and married couples were found to be more dedicated to their relationships than dating couples or nonengaged, cohabitating couples (Stanley et al., 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). On the other hand, when commitment is conceptualized as constraint (i.e., feeling restricted as a result of being in a relationship), married couples identified themselves as being more constrained than engaged and dating couples. Also, higher quality alternatives (i.e., feeling that needs can be met elsewhere outside of the relationship) were a better predictor of divorce than marital satisfaction, and were associated with inhibited loyalty and tendencies toward exiting the relationship.

Such findings about commitment in relationships do not offer an adequate explanation of how communication plays a role in relational quality and stability. Yelsma (1986) noted that levels of maturity and expectations for commitment may be major determinants of the degree of communication partners will have in their relationships. He found that younger persons reported having the most effective communication and satisfaction with their relationships. Specifically, these couples communicated more openly about their emotions, interests, disagreements, and needs. Feeney, Noller, and Roberts (1998) supported the findings that younger couples expressed more emotion and had higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Yelsma suggested that further research is needed to determine whether older persons lack ability in communication or whether they simply choose not to communicate as openly and frequently on such matters. Another possibility may be that older couples have established certain patterns of communication

and become complacent in the relationship or rigid in their ability to change. As well, a cohort effect may have existed in this particular study, downplaying important variables in the process of communication, such as individual ability to communicate and comfort with expressing oneself.

Ballard-Reisch and Weigel (1999) also noted that a reciprocal relationship exists between marital communication and marital commitment. They argued that while commitment is a process of past and present influences on a relationship, the day-to-day maintenance of the relationship occurs through direct and indirect communication. It appears to be important to determine what particular aspects of communication would lead to partners in a relationship having a desire to stay committed to one another. The present study explored the experiences of communication to better understand how partners in distressed couples perceive this concept.

Communication Patterns and Problems

Halford (2001) indicated that at a fundamental level there are two major functions of communication- sending and receiving messages, and that good communication generally requires that both partners send and receive messages in a balanced way. In discussing both message production and message reception in relationships, Kelly, Fincham, and Beach (2003) indicated that distressed couples have difficulty in both these areas. For instance, in terms of message production, they have difficulties pinpointing and describing problems, generating positive solutions, and managing negative affect. In terms of message reception, distressed couples are more likely to have difficulty because they make maladaptive causal attributions that accentuate the impact of negative marital

events and minimize the impact of positive events (e.g., attributing failure to complete a chore as the spouse being "lazy").

Along with the idea of sending and receiving messages appropriately, is the notion of "communicative competence" (Wilson & Sabee, 2003). According to these authors, the term communicative competence has been defined in several ways and it needs to be treated as a theoretical term rather than a construct to be fully useful. Wilson and Sabee also noted the importance of looking at this term in a general way (e.g., communicating so as to be perceived as effective and appropriate), as well as in specific terms (e.g., establish eye contact, match your partner's speech rate, etc.). To add, how one acquires communication skills and subsequently improves them can have an impact on how partners communicate (Greene, 2003). For example, skill acquisition in the area of communication may depend on such factors as speed, accuracy, flexibility, cognitive effort and so on. Research also shows that communication skills improve over time with practice, yet the improvements diminish along a trajectory (Greene, 2003).

The key role of communication in maintaining satisfying intimate relationships has been well documented (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; Parks, 2000; Satir, 1988). Interestingly, communication problems are better predictors of daily and long-term marital satisfaction than complaints in other areas, such as power struggles, role conflicts, and serious individual problems (O'Donohue & Crouch, 1996). It has been shown that through effective communication, partners report being more satisfied because they are able to express their needs, desires, preferences, and expectations to each other (Larson et al., 1998). However, the particular aspects of communication that lead to satisfaction in relationships are less clear. One possible reason for this is that couple communication is

multidimensional and includes many different components (Larson et al., 1998; O'Donohue & Crouch, 1996). Nonetheless, some communication patterns between couples have been outlined in the literature.

One well-supported finding regarding communication patterns in couples is that constructive, positive communication (e.g., compliments, support) is associated with relationship satisfaction, whereas negative communication (e.g., criticism, hostility) is associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; O'Donohue & Crouch, 1996, Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Compounding this issue is the fact that distressed couples both intend to use more negative communication and also receive messages in a more angry, critical, and unpleasant manner than their nondistressed counterparts (Schachter & O'Leary, 1985). As well, those couples where one partner was depressed and both partners were dissatisfied with the relationship were found to be the least maritally satisfied and expressed the most negative communication of all groups studied (Goldman Sher, Baucom, & Larus, 1990). Berg-Cross (2001) found that marital distress both provokes and maintains depression. Because marital distress is often linked with negative emotional states, poor communication and problem solving, and reliance on aversion and coercion to satisfy needs, depression in one or both partners often results when the distress is continuous.

It is disappointing, yet not surprising, to note that distressed couples experience increased difficulties with communication as they progress through the stages of their relationship (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). In particular, the areas of communication difficulties that were most commonly cited to increase over time were conflict management and intimacy. Karney, McNulty, and Bradbury (2001) indicated that

relationships are evaluated through temporal comparisons and that people tend to believe that their relationships should grow more satisfying over time. In a longitudinal study, these authors found that those partners who did not view the present as an improvement over the past were more likely to get divorced. Partners in relationships who are more understanding and supportive of one another however, have been found to be more satisfied (Barker & Lemle, 1985) and those who also have supportive communication with members of each other's families enhance the overall degree of relational stability (Yelsma, 1986).

Similar to how varying relationship stages affect couple communication and satisfaction, those couples in second marriages also have a unique set of challenges to face. For instance, Faber (2004) noted that many remarried couples are plagued with anxiety that stems from unresolved issues in their previous marriage. As a result, this "emotional baggage" that is brought into the marriage can create misunderstandings, projections, and misperceptions. Therefore, remarried couples may bring both unresolved family of origin issues and unresolved emotional issues from their first marriage into their current marriage. Without well-developed trust, this chronic anxiety can begin to place a strain on the relationship and remarried couples may be overly sensitive to conflict or differences of opinion, creating further anxiety over the risk of another failed marriage.

According to Faber (2004), the key to managing this anxiety is linked to one's ability to differentiate the new spouse from the old spouse, so as to avoid falling back into patterned behaviour and responding to the new spouse in an emotionally reactive way. Knox and Zusman (2001) also concluded that second wives reported less marital happiness due to difficulties with stepchildren, economic strains, and ongoing contact that

their husbands have with their former wives. In addition, Schneller and Arditti (2004) found that while the divorce experience appears to provide a catalyst for personal growth, it is also linked to greater insecurity, a loss of trust in relationships, and hesitancy about making future relationship commitments. The participants in Schneller and Arditti's study described several communication problems arising in their second marriages, such as a lack of expressive communication, an inability to resolve conflicting opinions or difficulties, emotional distance, and dishonest communication. Interestingly, this particular study indicated that both the men and the women wished to incorporate greater personal autonomy and improved communication into their post-divorce intimate relationships, such as accepting differences of opinion and personality, and working on developing conflict resolution skills.

Despite these challenges, Michaels (2006) found that the following factors contributed to stepfamily success: 1) A strong commitment to marriage and family; and, 2) A strong sense of family that developed around the time of the remarriage. Within these themes included behaviours such as making sure the new partner was the person they wanted to marry before they introduced him or her to their children, having realistic expectations about marriage, coordinating rules for children across households, focusing on "family time," and acceptance of the idea that a new family was being created. As well, Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, and Blais (2004) found that despite the characteristics of their relationship, spouses' communication skills play a major and significant role in predicting marital satisfaction for both men and women in remarriages. These authors noted that the positive impact of the spouse's messages, transmitted by good communication skills, contributes more to marital satisfaction than the impact of his

or her own messages. As such, communication is an interactional process and requires both the sending and receiving of messages to be positive and accurate. Faber (2004) recommended using a Bowenian Family Systems approach in marital therapy to help remarried couples work through their anxieties and to increase their levels of differentiation between their current and former spouses. Therefore, remarried couples may face more complex challenges than those couples in first marriages, yet there are some protective factors (e.g., a strong sense of commitment and family and good communication skills) that can help them to have more successful relationships.

One area where negative communication becomes particularly problematic is in dealing with conflict (Cahn, 1990a; Storaasli & Markman, 1990). How couples cope with their problems is likely more critical than the problems themselves. Partners in distressed relationships often deal with conflict by planning and engaging in negative and destructive communication practices. For example, Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, and Malarkey (1995) found that distressed couples are more likely to engage in conflict, criticize one another, have more expressions of disgust, withdraw from interaction, and disengage emotionally. However, couples who are able to communicate constructively are able to avoid possible conflict and resolve difficulties when they arise, thereby maintaining or enhancing the commitment and closeness of their relationship (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Therefore, it appears important to determine how couples can communicate more effectively during conflict situations, rather than enhancing their problems by communicating in a negative way.

A possible contributing factor to conflict in couples is that they may experience incongruence in their communication practices. Perceived understanding, or the feeling of

being understood, refers to an individual's assessment of his or her success or failure at being heard when attempting to communicate (Cahn, 1990a). Perceived understanding is found to grow in importance as relationships mature, suggesting that partners feel an increasing need to be understood to ensure relationship stability. Robinson and Blanton (1993) noted that distressed couples had a higher degree of incongruence in perceptions of communication, which led to one or both spouses feeling disillusioned about unmet needs. Manusov and Koenig (2001) also found that satisfied couples used more relationship-enhancing than distress-maintaining attributions to assign meaning to their spouses' behaviour. For example, these partners explained each other's behaviour in a positive and supportive way, which was congruent with the way they intended to get their messages across. Similarly, Manusov et al. (1997) and Edwards (1995) both discussed the importance of partners making *situational*, rather than *dispositional* attributions to their partner's behaviour so that one partner is not perceived as intentionally attempting to hurt the other and the behaviour is perceived as being changeable. In examining second marriages, Schneller and Arditti (2004) found a gender difference in this area, with women using more dispositional attributions to describe their partners' behaviour and men using more situational attributions to explain their relationship behaviour. These authors concluded that the women were more concerned with protecting or enhancing their self-images and the men were more concerned with buffering themselves from feeling as though they are incapable of intimacy.

One common communication pattern that involves incongruence is the "demand-withdrawal" pattern of interaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). This pattern of interaction

typically occurs when a dissatisfied person seeks change from his or her partner on a specific issue. In response, the partner who seeks to maintain the status quo withdraws or seeks to minimize discussion. According to the above researchers, those couples in which the man withdraws when the woman raises a problem to discuss are the most likely to experience long-term difficulties. Wood (2000) indicated that men are more likely than women to retreat from problems and that they also tend to minimize problems because they do not see them as significant and/or because they do not want to engage in conflict. Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, and Stuart (1998) found that violent distressed spouses tended to be the most demanding and withdrawing, the most blaming and contemptuous, and the least positive; whereas those couples who were nonviolent, but distressed, reported using a mixture of constructive and destructive conflict strategies. Research has also shown that distressed couples both engage in more conflict, as well as withdraw from interaction more than satisfied couples, such as becoming silent, decreasing eye contact, and disengaging emotionally from the interaction (Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, & Malarkey, 1995).

More recent research (Christensen, Eldridge, Catta-Preta, Lim, & Stagata, 2006) has even demonstrated a cross-cultural consistency in that when one partner chose to withdraw from communication, relationship satisfaction was lower (i.e., this finding was consistent among participants from four different countries). Avoiding problems and issues has also been linked in the literature to lower satisfaction and less constructive communication in couples (e.g., Berg-Cross, 2001; Gottman, 1993; Heavey et al., 1993; Sabourin & Stamp, 1995). Berg-Cross purported that when couples use avoidance, they are simply reverting back to the "flight" portion of the "fight or flight" physiological

response, which is a reaction that is "hard-wired" in us and that partners will often flee a situation when they feel threatened or attacked. Research has also shown that romantic partners will also use deception (e.g., lying or falsifying information) when they want to avoid an issue and/or if they fear an aggressive response (Boon & McLeod, 2001; Cole, 2001).

Another area where incongruence in communication becomes a factor is that of nonverbal communication. Gottman, Markman, and Notarius (1977) and Gottman (1979) first introduced the notion of reciprocity in body language in intimate relationships- where one partner is oriented to the other partner's behaviour and then reciprocates that behaviour. Reciprocity was found to be a particularly important aspect of communication behaviour because it reflected the inherently interpersonal and interconnected nature of interaction (Gottman, 1979). These early studies (Gottman et al., 1977; Gottman, 1979) found that reciprocity of negative affect was more extreme for dissatisfied couples than satisfied couples and that when dissatisfied couples engaged in negative interchanges, they were not able to exit them as quickly as satisfied couples. Manusov (1995) later replicated these findings and found that despite the satisfaction level in the relationships, reciprocity was the most common pattern for couples' non-verbal behaviours. However, dissatisfied couples were more likely to reciprocate negative behaviors (e.g., negative affect and low involvement) than were satisfied couples. Manusov, Floyd, and Kerssen-Griep (1997) also found that there was a much larger discrepancy for dissatisfied couples in how they viewed each other's nonverbal cues. For instance, distressed spouses saw their own behaviour as more unintentional and as less selfishly motivated than that of their partners. Manusov et al. (1997) concluded that the schema couples hold for their

partners impact the interpretations they make of nonverbal behaviours and that people make attributions for nonverbal cues.

Gottman, Swanson, and Swanson (2002) have introduced an interesting new mathematical approach, which they claimed could predict divorce or marital stability with up to 90% accuracy from observing marital interaction. These authors suggest that compared to happy, stable marriages, what happens in marriages headed for divorce is the following: 1) There is more emotional inertia; 2) Even before being influenced, the uninfluenced set point is more negative; 3) When interaction begins, the couple influences one another to become even more negative, rather than more positive; and, 4) Over time, as these negative interactions continue and become characteristic of the marriage, the couple may catastrophically lose its positive stable steady state. Hence, this mathematical marital model is an insightful way to conceptualize marital interaction and it provides an explanation for how negative communication can overtake positive communication- particularly in cases where communication is more negative initially. These authors also stated that this model can be applied to marital therapy, in that making small or "local" turnabouts in the overall direction of the interaction could repair the relationship. For instance, the therapist would encourage the couple to create more positive interactions in order to create a positive, stable state in the relationship. At any rate, the above ideas are exciting and thought-provoking ways to conceptualize marital interaction and to provide a basis for working with couples.

Results from studies have also shown that the highest levels of marital satisfaction are linked to egalitarian relationships in which partners share power, whereas relationships in which one spouse is dominant report the lowest levels of satisfaction

(Cole, 1985; Whisman & Jacobson, 1990). Patterns of expressive and receptive communication are believed to reflect relationship rules regarding whose thoughts, feelings, and observations are important. Pollock, Die, and Marriott (1989) demonstrated that while marital communication was significantly correlated with both egalitarianism and marital adjustment, those couples who were "very egalitarian" reported even higher communication satisfaction than those couples who described themselves as "moderately egalitarian." Equitable decision-making practices, where the needs of partners are communicated to one another, have also been associated with increased marital satisfaction (Houlihan, Jackson, & Rogers, 1984). Schneller and Arditti (2004) also found that in second marriages, divorce generated greater egalitarianism in the approach of men and women to intimate relationships, as relationships were less tied to traditional gendered expectations of women catering to men, and relationship possibilities expanded to include a respectful friendship of equals. Consequently, congruence and equality in communication patterns are of key importance to relationship satisfaction.

A communication pattern among couples that is often conceptualized in terms of congruence is that of self-disclosure, which is defined as private or intimate information individuals verbally reveal about themselves (including thoughts, feelings, and experiences) to others (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). The disclosure of self-relevant information to one's partner has been found to be positively related to indices of relationship satisfaction (Chelune, Rosenfeld, & Waring, 1985). This pattern may be due to partners feeling closer or more attached to one another as they disclose more personal information about themselves. As well, the nondistressed partners in the Chelune et al. study showed greater equity in their disclosure patterns and disclosed

emotions more often than distressed partners, suggesting that equity in emotional expression is an important factor contributing to relationship satisfaction. Dindia (2000) warned that the decision to make a self-disclosure is often conceived of as having a similar pattern over time, yet information is disclosed or not disclosed as part of an ongoing relationship process. Gottman and Driver (2005) found that intimacy is created in a hierarchical fashion by making "bids" for connection in everyday interactions and that self-disclosure is an end state in a very long chain that establishes responsiveness and connection. Thus, Gottman and Driver suggested that people need to become more attentive and mindful of the mundane part of the everyday relationship, when nothing important seems to be happening, because this is actually when very important things are happening.

With respect to the disclosure of emotions, Aune (1997) has shown that negative emotions were considered less appropriate to experience and express than positive emotions. Another interesting finding was that the differences between self and partner evaluations of emotion expression were most dramatic in undeveloped relationships. Thus, it follows that their evaluations of cognitive and communication events also diverged more. Aune suggested that while individuals in new relationships may be attempting to manage their image to appear more appealing, longer-term relational partners have received feedback about emotional expression through repeated interactions with one another. Gender differences in the expression of emotions are also evident: women have been found to discuss the marital relationship more openly and with more empathy than men, while also desiring more empathic communication from their husbands (Feeney et al., 1998; Larson et al., 1998). O'Donohue and Crouch (1996)

suggested however, that more research is needed to determine whether expectations of male and female communication are based solely on stereotypical assumptions of gender roles or whether there are more complex factors involved.

Nonetheless, clear differences have been found in the overt and covert communication styles of men and women (Berg-Cross, 2001; Burgoon & Bacue, 2003). Whereas women value and are more sensitive to verbal and nonverbal cues than men, men value and are more sensitive to strategic planning and activity-based decisions. Women tend to use longer utterances than men, whereas men tend to spend more total time in conversation. Men also swear more and women use more qualifying phrases. As well, women are far more likely to soften the impact of controversial messages or ask questions that serve to maintain a conversation. What is interesting, however, is the finding that both men and women get increasingly frustrated about communicating with someone whose style is different from their own. When husbands and wives are deciding how to communicate, women struggle to teach men their way of communicating and men struggle to have women respect their own style. Berg-Cross (2001) attributed socialization practices to gendered communication. Whereas women have been socialized to connect with others, men have been socialized to say things that inform the other person that they are in control.

Communication patterns in couples have also been shown to have important links to sexual satisfaction in marriage (Cooper & Stoltenberg, 1987; Larson et al., 1998) and are more likely to be rated as a problem area in relationships if communication is also an issue (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). For instance, Litzinger and Coop Gordon (2005) found that if couples have difficulty communicating but are sexually satisfied, they will

experience greater marital satisfaction than if they have a less satisfying sexual relationship. Since gender differences have been noted to impact couple communication, how that couple communicates also has an impact on sexual satisfaction within the relationship (Larson et al., 1998). These researchers found that women who used open communication contributed to their husbands' sexual satisfaction and men who used empathic communication contributed to their wives' sexual satisfaction. However, Metts, Sprecher, and Regan (1998) proposed that men and women often behave in accordance with sex role expectations. Men are often less inhibited by social norms in expressing their sexual desire and women are often socialized to use a more indirect method of expressing sexual desire. Therefore, it follows that men and women would attempt to balance their relationships by encouraging their partners to use the type of communication they are more likely to use themselves.

How therapists conceptualize communication patterns and problems in couples also provides useful information about this topic. According to therapists, the most common complaint of couples is communication (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Therapists reported that poor communication has the most damaging effect on couples in therapy. Communication was also rated as the most desired topic for future marital therapy research efforts. In an exploration of marital communication problems cited by therapists (Vangelisti, 1994), those cited most frequently included not taking the other's perspective when listening, blaming the other for negative occurrences, and criticizing or putting down the other. Of great significance is that 99% of the explanations given by therapists for couples' communication problems were relatively stable or unchanging, such as

individuals' beliefs about relationships, how partners were raised by their parents, and poor relational "habits."

Another surprising finding in Vangelisti's study was that none of the therapists attributed couples' communication problems to interpersonal causes (i.e., how they interact with one another). Instead, the therapists reasoned that internal factors, such as unspoken expectations and poor self-esteem; and external factors, such as behaviour taught to individuals during childhood and life stressors, were responsible for communication problems between couples. Interestingly, however, when they were asked what they felt the most central problem in dissatisfied relationships was, the majority of therapists noted that communication was usually a manifestation of other, more central relational issues (e.g., fear, insecurity, lack of confidence). Nonetheless, it is important to note that communication problems are viewed as significant by both couples and therapists alike. Such findings provide support for exploring communication in research and facilitating a clearer understanding of the topic.

Attachment in Intimate Relationships

The notion that adults form attachment bonds with one another has been a guiding principle among intimate relationship research. The pioneering work of Bowlby (1969;1973;1979) in developing attachment theory has sparked a great deal of interest in this area. In developing attachment theory, Bowlby attempted to explain why strong emotional bonds were formed between infants and their primary caregivers and why infants become so distressed when separated from them. Bowlby claimed that infants engaged in a predictable sequence of emotional and behavioural reactions following separation, which included protest (an obsessive search for the absent caregiver and

resistance to others' attempts at comfort), despair (a period of passivity, lethargy, and depressed mood), and detachment (ignoring caregivers and avoiding contact with them). According to Bowlby, although the need to form strong attachments with caregivers is nearly universal in young children, the way in which children interact with their caregivers depends largely on how they are treated. Bowlby conceptualized that "models of the self" and "models of the other" will indicate the quality of the attachment bond within a relationship. Thus, under conditions such as anxiety, fear, illness, and fatigue, children will attempt to establish contact with an attachment figure to regain a sense of security.

Ainsworth et al. (1978) broadened the concept of security by viewing the attachment system as functioning continuously to provide the infant with a secure base from which to engage in exploration. They noted that young children learn early to what extent they can rely on the attachment figure and that the goal of the attachment system is the maintenance of *felt security.* Through a laboratory procedure called the 'Strange Situation,' (an infant's parent would leave a room the infant was in and as the parent returned, the infant's reaction to the parent was studied), Ainsworth et al. (1978) identified three distinct patterns of interaction shown by infants toward their parents: 1) Children who have *secure* relationships use their caregivers as a base of comfort and security to regulate and ameliorate distress when they are upset, 2) Children involved in *avoidant* relationships do not seek support from their caregivers; rather they are highly self-reliant, and 3) Children with *anxious/ambivalent* relationships make inconsistent and conflicted attempts to gain emotional support from their caregivers.

The works of Bowlby, Ainsworth, and others (e.g., Sroufe & Waters, 1977), have provided a foundation for the way in which adult relationships are conceived. Bowlby (1969, 1973) argued that attachment patterns show continuity across the life cycle. Adults have also been shown to have similar reactions to separation as children, where those adults with more secure attachments seek support from their partners after being separated from them and those with insecure attachments either do not seek support (i.e., avoidant attachment style) or make inconsistent and conflicted attempts to gain support (i.e., anxious/ambivalent style) (Zeifman & Hazan, 2000). Siegel (1999) presented a thought-provoking neurological approach to explain the effect of childhood attachment experiences on later relationships. Siegel argued that relationships early in life might shape the structures in the brain that create representations of relationship experiences and influence "how we mentally construct reality" (p. 4). He went on to point out that while this shaping process occurs throughout life, it is most crucial during the early years of childhood. Therefore, different patterns of child-parent attachment shape the ability of the mind to integrate experience and to adapt to future relationships.

The notion that early childhood attachment experiences affect later attachment patterns has been supported in the attachment literature. For instance, Cowan and Cowan (2001) conducted a longitudinal study of couples with young children and their results revealed significant links between partner's working models of attachment with their parents, the attachment patterns they describe as a couple and the quality of the couple relationship. Specifically, when partners had insecure working models of attachment based on descriptions of relationships with their parents, they argued more when they were alone as a couple and when they were parenting their child. Another longitudinal

study (Klohnen & Bera, 1998) examined the attachment patterns of women over a 31-year period in their adulthood. These authors found that women who reported insecure attachments with their parents also consistently reported the following over time: they had fewer happy and steady relationships; they showed a pattern of distant, defensive, and vulnerable behaviour and personality characteristics; they reported internal working models characterized by distrustful self-reliance and interpersonal and emotional distance; and they had childhood environments that afforded fewer opportunities for developing interpersonal ties. As well, in a meta-analytic study of attachment representations, van Ljzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (1996) noted that whereas fathers, mothers, and adolescents from nonclinical groups had a similar distribution of attachment styles, clinical mothers with a low socioeconomic status were more often characterized by dismissing and insecure attachment representations and unresolved loss or trauma as a child. These authors hypothesized that impoverished environments may provoke more traumatic events than average environments.

Fisher and Crandell (2001) proposed the notion of "complex attachment" to describe the effect of early attachment experiences on later relationships. They suggested that in adult couple relationships, each partner functions as an attachment figure to the other. These authors posed the idea that each partner experiences the position of "infant," who is emotionally dependent upon the attachment figure. Using this definition, the dual nature of attachment has an added dimension compared with attachment in parent-child dyads. Sperling, Berman, and Fagen (1992) also noted that adult relationships are much more complex and transactional than parent-child relationships, serving a variety of needs at different times. However, the power structure within the relationship would seem to

influence how emotionally dependent each partner is on one another. As well, Bretherton and Munholland (1999) pointed out that it would be problematic for one person to continually provide protection and care to the other partner without experiencing this behaviour as being reciprocated.

Although childhood attachment experiences undoubtedly have a significant impact on later attachment experiences, other factors have also been identified as playing a role in adult attachment. Crowell and Treboux (2001) found that early attachment relationships influenced the development of later attachment relationships because individuals were likely to describe similar attachment styles for their parent-child relationship and their partner relationship. However, these authors suggested that the quality of the current attachment relationship and ongoing interactions, as well as previous experiences with romantic partnerships, influence the construction of attachment representations of the shared relationship. Individual differences, such as personality variables and relationship expectations, have also been found to shape adult attachment processes (Bartholomew, 1994; Duck, 1994). Brennan and Bosson (1998) discovered that attachment style affects where individuals derive their self-esteem. For instance, those with a secure style of attachment tend to derive self-esteem from socially based sources and to be more open to partner feedback, whereas those with an insecure attachment style derive self-esteem from competence-based sources and are indifferent to partner feedback.

Attachment styles have also been shown to change over the lifecycle, suggesting that a number of factors are involved to allow this change process to happen. In a longitudinal study of attachment style in adults who failed to thrive as children, findings

showed changes in attachment styles occurred, including changes from insecure to secure attachment styles (Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001). In this study, the children were labelled as "non-organic failure-to-thrive," which is applied to children whose failure to grow according to norms is due to psychosocial problems in their environment rather than as a result of any medical problem (p. 182). These children received treatment and intervention, as well as had their own particular life experiences, which could have led to changes in their attachment experiences. These authors noted that the following could have contributed to the attachment changes: natural changes in attachment patterns, the intervention, change in quality of parenting, temperamental factors and cognitive abilities, and other unidentified factors. Nonetheless, it appears that attachment styles established in childhood do not necessarily continue through to adulthood.

However, Rothbard and Shaver (1994) pointed out that attachment styles may originate in relationships with parents and then become elaborated and changed in the context of later important close relationships because the influence of parents continues to have an impact on people's lives for many years. As well, Weiss (1991) noted that attachment often changes as partners move through various stages of their relationship. For instance, courtship behaviours can be understood as expressions of attachment in formation. As attachment to new figures begins, individuals tend to demonstrate more intense attachment behaviours than later on when the relationship is more secure and less energy is needed to ensure the continuation of the attachment. Attachment relationships have also been shown to change during periods of life transitions, such as during childbirth. For instance, Levitt, Coffman, Guacci-Franco, and Loveless (1994) pointed out that well-being in the postbirth period is dependent on support derived from close

attachment relations and that those couples who do not meet each other's needs for support experience negative effects on the attachment relationship. A positive attachment relationship has also been found to help each partner successfully meet the challenges of aging (Antonucci, 1994). Therefore, it is possible for attachment styles to change both over the lifecycle and throughout the process of a relationship.

As stated above, there appear to be many factors that affect how an individual's attachment style is created (e.g., childhood attachment experiences, previous relationship experiences, and personality constructs). The three attachment patterns in children labelled by Ainsworth et al. (1978) (secure, avoidant, anxious/ambivalent) have also been used to analyze attachment patterns in adult relationships. Specifically, Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed a widely used instrument to conceptualize the notion of romantic love experiences in a way that parallels the three attachment types. These researchers found that the majority of their adult samples could classify themselves as one of the three types and they suggested that their results provided encouraging support for an attachment-theoretical perspective of romantic relationships.

Several researchers have used these three attachment types to explore intimate relationships. One notable pattern is that the secure style is related to positive relationship characteristics (i.e., intimate, stable, and satisfying) and constructive approaches to conflict, and that both the avoidant and anxious/ ambivalent styles are related to negative relationship characteristics (i.e., low levels of intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction) and destructive approaches to conflict (Collins, 1996; Levy & Davis, 1988; Morgan & Shaver, 1999; Simpson, Gangestad, & Nations, 1996). Etherton and Beach (1999) and Cohn, Silver, Cowan, and Pearson (1992) demonstrated that the secure partner may buffer

the negative effects of insecure attachment because they will generally perceive their partners as reliable and that such expectations elicit positive behaviour. Davis, Kirkpatrick, Levy, and O'Hearn (1994) pointed out that any sweeping generalizations about which attachment styles are universally good or bad with respect to close relationships cannot be made. However, Davis (1999) noted that relationships composed of anxious men and avoidant women experienced the highest breakup rates across time. Mikulincer and Florian (1999) also found that spouses who endorsed a secure style of attachment reported high family cohesion and adaptability, whereas spouses who endorsed an avoidant style reported a low level in those dimensions. Gender differences have also been noted with respect to attachment styles, where greater anxiety in women was related to lower overall satisfaction for their male partners. When men were comfortable with closeness and intimacy, their partners reported greater overall satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994).

Although adult attachment is often categorized according to the three attachment types suggested by Hazan and Shaver (1987), Bartholomew (1990) has built upon this work to develop the four-category model. In this model, Bowlby's notion of models of the self and other is combined to form an attachment style. Thus, the four proposed attachment styles include: 1) *secure* (warm and fulfilling relationship) 2) *preoccupied* (overly dependent and in need of approval) 3) *fearful* (distrustful and fearful of rejection), and 4) *dismissing* (passively avoiding closeness and intimacy). In a test of the model, Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) discovered that both self-models and models of others are separate, important dimensions of an adult's orientation to close relationships and that they conformed to the theoretical model. Bartholomew (1993) pointed out that the four-

category model is more sensitive to the complexity of individual differences than traditional grouping processes and that it is the first model to specify relations among attachment styles. This model is thus used as a helpful framework to conceptualize attachment processes in intimate relationships.

Research has been increasing from the perspective of the four-category model. Regarding the issue of couples dealing with stress, Collins and Feeney (2000) found that the dismissing style of attachment predicted ineffective support seeking and that the fearful style of attachment predicted poor caregiving. Pistole (1994) discovered that under stressful conditions produced by internal or external pressures to the system, attachment behaviours might be aroused in the more stressed partner and lead to a closeness-distance struggle. Therefore, a partner who typically holds a preoccupied style may switch positions and adopt their partner's dismissing style, resulting in a misunderstanding of needs. Conversely, Guerrero and Burgoon (1996) found that adults with a preoccupied style showed the strongest pattern of reciprocating increases in involvement and compensating for decreases in involvement, suggesting that adults with a preoccupied style would be more likely to maintain their style of attachment during stressful times. Research studying self-esteem with the use of the four-category model has also shown that individuals with negative-other models are relatively adverse to partner feedback, and individuals with negative-self models are distressed by feedback (Brennan & Bosson, 1998).

The notion of internal working models of self and others has since expanded in importance. Collins (1996) noted that these cognitive, representational models begin to develop in the context of parent-child interactions and are then carried forward into new

relationships, where they guide how individuals manage their relationships and how they construe their social world. Collins found that there were similarities between the attachment of one's partner and caregiving style of one's parents. For instance, individuals tended to be in relationships with partners who shared similar beliefs and feelings about becoming close and intimate with others and about the dependability of others based on the caregiving style of their opposite sex parent in particular. More recent research by Collins, Ford, Guichard, and Allard (2006) found that those partners with insecure working models of attachment were more predisposed to construe events in negative ways, to experience emotional distress, and to behave in ways that are likely to be detrimental to relationship functioning (e.g., less appreciation, greater emotional distancing). Shaver, Collins, and Clark (1996) also pointed out that an individual's currently active goals and mood states will affect which model gets activated and used. Whereas some models will be more or less automatically activated in response to specific situational stimuli, others will be recruited or invoked in response to whatever motives the individual is striving to fulfill. Bretherton and Munholland (1999) further suggested that the fact that two individuals' working models and expectations are involved in attachment interactions engenders some stability. When one partner's interactive behaviour changes, the other's expectations are violated and thus respond by resisting the change. However, these stabilizing processes may be discontinued when it becomes evident that the old model no longer works. Hence, internal working models of attachment are largely stable and based on childhood experiences, yet they can change depending on specific situational stimuli.

While attachment patterns in adult relationships have been well documented, the link between attachment styles and communication is less clear. Pistole (1994) noted that attachment is the starting point of the couples' relational system and the foundation for patterns of communication. Conversely, other researchers (e.g., Main, 1996; Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996) believe that communication and discourse processes are the mechanisms by which relatively stable patterns of attachment are formed and perpetuated. These researchers asserted that communication behaviour is developed in childhood, depending on how parents communicate with their children. For example, secure infants are found more likely than avoidant infants to engage in direct communication by using obvious verbal and nonverbal signals to relay their emotional states to caregivers. Anxious-ambivalent infants, in contrast, were found to have no trouble experiencing and expressing emotions, yet their emotions seemed conflicted, incoherent, and difficult to manage. Main (1996) suggested that if a child is helped to detect feelings accurately and act on them appropriately, he or she will develop a more coherent mind, which is reflected in coherent, unobstructed, effective communication about emotions and close relationships. Siegel (1999) argued that for "full" emotional communication to occur, one person needs to allow his or her state of mind to be influenced by that of the other. In this sense, one's ability to experience the subjective world and interpret the nonverbal signals of his or her partner creates an atmosphere of "collaborative communication," which allows their minds to connect with one another (p. 70). Siegel also asserted that the attachment system developed in childhood motivates the infant to establish communication with caregivers. Throughout this process, communication patterns are developed and carried into future relationships and personal interactions.

Certain communication patterns have been related to attachment styles. Collins and Read (1990) found that women who were comfortable with being close (i.e., a secure attachment style) perceived less conflict, viewed themselves as warm and responsive listeners, tended to rate the level of communication as higher, and reported greater self-disclosure. Likewise, men who were comfortable with closeness (i.e., a secure attachment style) viewed their communication as positive, reported feeling close to their partners, thought they disclosed more, and stated being able to get their partners to open up to them. Robinson and Blanton (1993) noted that the quality of communication was higher in couples with higher levels of intimacy (e.g., they shared more thoughts and feelings, listened to the other's point of view, and avoided conflict). Feeney and Collins (2001) also found that attachment security was associated with more effective, responsive forms of caregiving, whereas insecure attachment was associated with ineffective caregiving. It is important to note that perceptions play a crucial role in studying the concepts of communication and attachment, as each individual will have a subjective perception of their experiences in relationships. Vangelisti (2001) went as far as to state that people's perceptions can be as important for future interactions as what actually happens. While the above demonstrates some research in the area of combining attachment and communication, there still remains a lack of extensive research in this area. Thus, it is necessary to study these concepts together to help bridge this gap in the literature.

Marital Therapy and Communication

When examining the concept of communication in intimate couples that are distressed, it is also helpful to explore what trends marital therapy has followed in this area. A proper understanding of communication is key to marital therapy because

communication is often a treatment target (O'Donohue & Crouch, 1996). Of particular importance is determining which treatment techniques have shown to improve communication skills in couples, thus improving their overall relationship and increasing their attachment bonds to one another. It is also helpful to note whether traditional marital therapy approaches address the communication difficulties that couples report to be disruptive to their relationship.

A number of therapy approaches have been developed to treat relationship problems, such as systems theory approaches, behaviour therapy approaches, and person-centered approaches (Gottman & Rushe, 1990). However, two approaches have reportedly been the most systematically evaluated: behavioural marital therapy (BMT) and communication therapy (CT) (O'Leary & Turkewitz, 1981). Behavioural marital therapy is designed to increase productive problem solving and to establish interactions with equitable exchanges. Communication therapy is designed to improve couple communication through the development of better skills, such as that of Satir (Human Validation Process) and others (e.g., Conjugal Relationship Enhancement and Minnesota Couple Communication Program). However, Berg-Cross (2001) warned that despite the fact that many couples have the skills to communicate well, they intentionally give each other hostile and hurtful messages.

Both BMT and CT have been found to reduce marital problems and increase general communication patterns, even though BMT does not traditionally focus on communication skills to the same extent as communication therapy (O'Leary & Turkewitz, 1981). Both of these therapies have been found to help couples resolve conflict by helping them understand the role of the emotions in problem-solving, creating

safety and containment, developing empathic listening skills, learning how to use negotiation and compromise, and encouraging them to understand each other's perspective (Gilbert & Shmukler, 1996). It is interesting to note that BMT was found to be the treatment of choice for younger couples, whereas CT was found to be the treatment of choice for older couples, suggesting that older couples may have more rigid communication patterns and need to work on the specific components of communication.

Behaviour marital therapy was also found to increase marital adjustment and decrease the amount of negative communication couples use, which is more prevalent among distressed couples (Goldman Sher et al., 1990; Wilson, Bornstein, & Wilson, 1988). The Minnesota Couple Communication Program has focused on increasing each partner's accuracy of perceptions about themselves and the relationship, as well as on developing a clear, direct, and open style of communication (Wampler, 1982). The difficulty of couples with incongruent perceptions has been noted as one of the biggest obstacles to clear communication (Caesar, 1993). This program was found to be superior to other alternatives and to have a positive impact on both communication quality and relationship quality. Thus, both BMT and CT have been found to be effective therapies for improving communication patterns in couples.

Communication components have also been added to other marital therapy programs to strengthen their overall effectiveness. For instance, a communication skills training component was added to an Emotionally Focused couples therapy program (EFT) (James, 1991), which traditionally focused on the emotional experience underlying the positions each partner took in relation to the other (Johnson & Greenberg, 1985). The communication skills that were taught included expression of thoughts, feelings, wants,

and needs, and responding in an empathic way. The addition of this component was found to produce immediate gains in communication for the couples, yet upon follow-up, many couples had difficulty applying the skills they gained and indicated they would have liked more sessions focused solely on communication. Currently, EFT, which specifically focuses on creating secure bonds between spouses, has the best outcomes of all forms of couple therapy tested and the outcomes also appear to be stable across time (Shachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2004). This therapy helps to create a secure environment for couples, where the therapist acts as a temporary attachment figure for the insecurely attached individuals (Johnson, 2003, 2004). A communication component was also added to a sexual enhancement program; it was a key component because improvements in communication were found to have some beneficial impact on their sexual relationships (Cooper & Stoltenberg, 1987). Therefore, communication appears to be an important area for couples, despite what problems are initially labelled as needing improvement.

Schachter and O'Leary (1985) have suggested a number of ways that marital therapists can work with individual couples to help them improve their communication patterns: behaviour rehearsing, coaching, modelling, practicing at home with a tape recorder, helping partners become aware of how they are perceiving one another's words, and assisting them to communicate more accurately and positively. Rudes (1992) suggested using a letter writing intervention to improve communication. Using this technique, partners would write letters to each other to exchange new information in a format that allows them to reflect upon their exchanges. This intervention may aid couples to alter their understanding of their own and the other partner's perceptions and expectations in the relationship. Vangelisti (1994) also pointed out that many counsellors

encourage individual solutions for communication problems, even though such problems are jointly constructed. As well, O'Donahue and Crouch (1996) outlined four areas of communication that need to be examined, which include quantitative, qualitative, interactional and nonverbal aspects of communication. Thus, it is important that therapists use effective techniques to help couples deal with all of their communication issues.

It is essential to note that the goals of marital therapy and communication programs are predicated upon normative claims concerning what constitutes good communication. O'Donohue and Crouch (1996) warned that stereotypic expectations of gender differences in communication pose the potential for a number of problems in marital communication therapy. For instance, there is the potential for a misunderstanding of how gender influences the expectations and perceptions partners have of their communicative behaviour and that stereotypic expectations may also influence the clinician's expectations of a client's communicative behaviour. Therefore, they suggested that therapists directly question the degree to which individuals feel confused or uncomfortable in communicating because of gender issues and that therapists should explore whether clients have stereotyped expectations of communication which conflict with the therapist's recommendations. Another important point regarding marital therapy and the likelihood of improving communication skills is that the long-term effects of such therapy are unclear (Berg-Cross, 2001; James, 1991; Wampler, 1982). Consequently, it is important to consider how communication skills can be presented to couples so that long-term improvement in this area is possible.

It is also important to note that issues affecting couples have changed over recent years, forcing therapists to evaluate how to face a whole new set of complex issues between couples (Papp, 2000). For instance, dual career couples, internet romances, homosexual couples adopting children, and genetically designed children are all relatively new issues that therapists must consider and then determine how to adapt their techniques in dealing with such couples. Therefore, therapists have a responsibility to examine how changing values and social forces affect the communication and attachment processes in couples, as well as what approaches and interventions are the most effective ways to help them with such issues.

Purpose and Research Questions

A strong need exists for research in the area of communication in distressed intimate relationships from an attachment perspective, as communication has been found to be an important issue for couples, as well as an indication for relationship satisfaction (Parks, 2000; Rogers, 1998; Satir, 1988; Sprecher & Duck, 2006). Attachment has also been shown to be an important factor in intimate relationships (Cobb & Bradbury, 2003; Collins, 1996; Bartholomew, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, the two topics have rarely been studied together. Thus, it is essential to discover what types of communication patterns partners in distressed couples use and how communication can be improved in order to develop a fulfilling and satisfying relationship. At the same time, it is important to learn what makes partners in distressed intimate relationships feel closer to or more distant from one another. Such information will be useful to help distressed couples improve their relationships and to help therapists/counsellors develop more

effective and long-lasting therapeutic techniques to assist couples in creating better communication practices and to become closer in their relationships.

While there is a substantial body of quantitative marital communication literature, few in-depth qualitative studies exist. The subjective experiences of couples have not been well documented in this field. The richness of data and unique participant perspectives that qualitative research provides are lacking in the existing body of literature in this area of inquiry. As well, previous studies focused largely on the couple as a unit or men and women in separate groups. However, along with exploring the couple as a unit and the male and female groups, the current study also aimed to explore the process/experience of communication, attachment, and couples counselling from each partner as a separate entity, thus allowing each individual's "voice" to be heard. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences of communication patterns and attachment/intimacy of partners in distressed intimate relationships. As well, the participants' experiences of couples counselling were explored to gain a better understanding of what strategies partners in distressed couples perceive as being helpful in improving their communication practices and strengthening their attachment bonds to one another. Specifically, the research questions are:

1. What is the experience of communication between partners in distressed couples?
2. What makes partners in distressed couples feel closer to or more distant from one another?
3. What are the experiences of couples counselling for partners in distressed couples?

CHAPTER THREE

Method

This study was designed to explore the experiences of communication and attachment of partners in distressed intimate relationships. As well, the researcher was also interested in how couples counselling may be perceived as helpful to couples with communication difficulties. The qualitative method of basic interpretive inquiry was used for the current study. Qualitative inquiry was chosen for several reasons. First, according to Merriam (2002), there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality, rather than a fixed, agreed upon interpretation. A multi-perspective approach is especially pertinent when working with couples. Therefore, an "interpretive" qualitative approach was used in this study in order to focus on how individuals experience and interact with their social world and the meaning it has for them (Merriam, 2002). Second, interpretive qualitative research takes into account several aspects of qualitative inquiry, which include the following: 1) researchers strive to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences, 2) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, 3) the process of research is inductive, where researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses or theories, and 4) the product of qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive in conveying what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon.

Merriam (2002) further indicated that a qualitative researcher conducting a basic interpretive study would be interested in the following: 1) how people interpret their experiences, 2) how they construct their worlds, and 3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Furthermore, Merriam (2002) stated, "The overall purpose is to

understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 38). Huberman and Miles (2002) described an interpretive study as one that asks a "how" question and then proceeds to examine how "…problematic, turning-point experiences are organized, perceived, constructed, and given meaning by interacting individuals" (p. 351). As well, Merriam (2002) indicated that in a basic interpretive study, data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. Merriam also noted that what questions are asked in the interviews depends on the disciplinary theoretical framework of the study.

The method of basic interpretive qualitative research was used in this study because the researcher viewed it as being the best fit for the type of information that was sought. Basic interpretive qualitative research was determined to be an appropriate method for this study because the researcher was interested in understanding the experience of communication from the perspective of partners in distressed couples and how they view attachment as playing a role in the way that they communicate with one another. The use of this particular method also allowed the participants to provide a rich description of their own subjective view of their experiences and how they interpreted or constructed their relationships, rather than the researcher imposing a theoretical meaning onto their experiences. As well, because combining the concepts of communication and attachment together appears to be a new area of inquiry, a qualitative method allows the researcher to take an inductive approach that builds on providing information about these concepts.

Several authors have discussed the importance of qualitative research and how it can be used to provide an in-depth view of a particular concept or experience. Lincoln

and Denzin (2003) described qualitative research as "…a field of inquiry in its own right," crossing many disciplines and gaining recognition as a distinguished research method. Miles and Huberman (1994) noted the following about qualitative data: "They are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (p. 1). Denzin and Lincoln (2003) also noted that qualitative researchers stress the social constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry.

Because qualitative research tends to be value-laden, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) also discussed the importance of the qualitative researcher temporarily suspending ontological judgments about the nature and essence of things and events in order to focus on the ways that people subjectively interpret their world. Merriam (2002) also noted that by temporarily "bracketing" or putting aside one's personal attitudes or beliefs about a phenomenon, consciousness itself becomes heightened, allowing the researcher to more clearly see the essence of the phenomenon. Therefore, it is important for qualitative researchers to first become aware of their values about a phenomenon and how they came to establish those views or judgments. Then, it will become possible to bracket out those views to establish a more objective view of the participants' experiences.

Having justified the researcher's logic for conducting a basic interpretive qualitative design, the remainder of this chapter will discuss the following: a) the researcher's personal biases/presuppositions, b) the method used for the study, c) the characteristics of the participants, d) the data collection processes used, e) the data

analysis techniques followed, f) the precautions taken to protect the trustworthiness/ dependability of the data, and g) ethical considerations made throughout the study.

Personal Biases/Presuppositions

As previously mentioned, it is critical for the qualitative researcher to "bracket" or put aside one's beliefs about the phenomenon in order to uncover the essence of it. Therefore, it is key for the researcher to bracket any presuppositions, attitudes, or personal biases towards the phenomenon being studied in order to understand what the participants are truly expressing. It should also be noted that bracketing is a continuous process and as presuppositions are made aware, this can lead to more discovery. Consequently, the research is conducted with personal bias having as little influence on the findings as possible. The following personal biases will be written in the first person, so as to better capture the subjective experience of the researcher.

Prior to beginning this research, I reflected on what it was about this topic that was of interest to me and how the research questions were developed throughout this process. I first began conducting couples therapy as a Ph.D. student intern while taking a family counselling course in 2001. Shortly after, I became extremely interested in working with couples, as the dynamics were interesting to me and I felt that there was a great deal of energy in the therapy room. The notion of what makes relationships work or why certain couples are satisfied in their relationships, while others are not, has always been a topic of interest to me. As I began to work with more couples as a therapist, a common theme in their presenting problems became evident, which was that they generally experienced difficulties in communication. I wondered why this area continued to surface as an issue and what was contributing to these communication problems. I also

noticed that they had differences in their desires or preferences for closeness and distance and that these discrepancies created difficulties for them in their relationships. As a therapist who worked with couples, I was also very curious as to how to become a more effective interventionist and what it was about couples counselling that was helpful in improving communication in couples.

I then became very excited about considering these topics together, as they seemed to complement one another very well. Therefore, the next step involved pursuing a research project in this area to determine how those couples that have had difficulties in communication view attachment as playing a role in how they communicated. I was particularly interested in couples that had difficulties in communicating because those were the types of clients that I continued to encounter in my practice as a clinician. By conducting this research, it was my hope that knowledge would be gained about relationships, communication, attachment, and marital therapy. Above all, I wanted to be able to transfer this new knowledge to the couples that sought therapy and to continue to attain new heights as a couples counsellor.

Keeping in mind that I am a therapist, it is likely not surprising that I view marital therapy as a valuable endeavour to help couples cope with relational difficulties and to generate alternative solutions to problems. Therefore, I believe therapy is an excellent option for couples to help resolve their communication difficulties. I am also open to learning how the therapy process can be improved and/or what aspects of therapy are particularly helpful. Consequently, although I am biased in believing that therapy is beneficial for couples with communication problems, I am also willing to keep an open mind as to how the therapy process can be improved.

Method

The researcher first placed two public advertisements to search for participants who have been having communication problems and have participated in marital therapy, yet there were no responses to these advertisements. Therefore, the study instead took place at a large public counselling agency located in Edmonton, Alberta where therapy and assessment services are provided to individuals, couples, groups, and families. This researcher first met with the Director of Counselling Services at this agency to get permission to pass on information about the study to therapists at the centre. This researcher was then given permission to send out a centre-wide email informing therapists of the nature of the research and to ask if any therapists conducting couples counselling would be willing to ask their clients if they would like more information about participating in the research. Those clients that were interested were given the researcher's phone number and contacted the researcher directly. Four of the interviews were conducted in a therapy room in this setting and six of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes.

Participants

The study involved a purposeful sample of five heterosexual couples. A "purposeful" sample was described by Patton (2002) as selecting information-rich cases from which one can gain a great deal of insights and an in-depth understanding about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry. Therefore, one criterion for inclusion to become participants in this study was that they have been to some type of couples counselling or marital therapy program, because they were self-identified as "distressed" and were thus able to comment on what was most helpful in improving their

communication skills as a couple. The other criteria for inclusion were that the couple be in a long-term committed relationship (either dating, common-law, or married), that they be of heterosexual orientation, and that both partners were able to participate in the study. A few potential participants were screened out of the study due to not meeting all of the above inclusion criteria.

Demographic information was collected from the participants in order to gain an in-depth view of the participants, such as age, level of education, socioeconomic status, and length of time together in the relationship. Participants included five Caucasian males and five Caucasian females (i.e., five couples) aged 28-40 years, with a mean age of 32.5 years. All of the participants reported that they had children either from the current or past relationship. All had biological children of their own, except for one male participant who had stepchildren from his current relationship. All of the participants reported that they were either married to or living common-law with their current partners. In regards to the amount of time they have been in their current relationships (prior to and including time married or common-law) ranged from 1 year to 12 years. As well, six of the participants in this study reported that they had been previously married and divorced. The level of education of participants ranged from a grade 12 diploma to a master's degree. Two of the participants held blue-collar occupations (e.g., heavy equipment operator) and eight of the participants held white-collar occupations (e.g., travel agent, auditor, manager, administrative supervisor). A personal annual income ranging from $32 000- $60 000 per year and a household annual income ranging from $75 000- $100 000 per year were reported.

Data Collection

The data was collected through 10 individual interviews with the partners of five couples (i.e., 10 individuals). In other words, interviews were conducted separately with five women and five men. The interviews were conducted with each partner individually, so as to allow the participants to feel open to speak freely without being concerned about their words or impressions being monitored by their partners. Prior to beginning the interviews, the researcher began developing a rapport with the participants during an initial phone call so that they would feel more comfortable opening up and trusting the interview process. In addition to this rapport building, the researcher explained the nature of the research and informed them that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could drop out of the study at any time. When the researcher met with the participants, the nature of the research was once again explained and all of the questions or concerns the participants had were answered. As well, the participants were ensured that any information they disclosed throughout the study would be kept strictly confidential and that there would be no identifying information of any kind in the write-up of the study. The researcher then asked them to read the letter of information to participants that explained the nature of the research in writing (see Appendix A) and asked them to sign the informed consent form (see Appendix B) if they confirmed that they still wanted to participate in the study. The participants were then asked to fill out a demographic information form (see Appendix C) in order to obtain the description of the demographic characteristics provided above.

The researcher asked general, open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview to obtain the participants' perspectives using a semi-structured interview guide. Patton

(2002) described the interview guide as a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. The purpose of the interview guide is to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed, while at the same time allowing the interviewer to be free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will further illuminate the particular subject being explored. Patton (2002) noted that the advantage of using an interview guide is that it ensures that the interviewer/evaluator has carefully decided how best to use the limited time available and also to make interviewing different people more systematic and comprehensive. Therefore, this researcher developed an interview guide to provide a basic outline of topics/issues to be discussed by the participants (see Appendix D for a copy of this interview guide).

The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. There was no set interview length and they proceeded as long as was necessary. The average length of the interviews was 1.5 to 2 hours. The researcher then either mailed or emailed a summary of the interviews to the participants in order to check the accuracy of the data that was collected. The participants responded by phone or email to either state that they did not have anything to add or to provide the researcher with further information or clarification. Three of the participants had further comments to make or statements that they wanted to clarify.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2002) noted that the analysis of the data in a basic interpretive qualitative approach involves identifying recurring patterns that arise from the data. According to Merriam, the findings are a mix of these recurring patterns supported by the data from which they were derived. Merriam described the overall interpretation of the

data as the researcher's understanding of the participants' understanding of the phenomenon of interest, which is mediated by the researcher's disciplinary perspective. In other words, the participants described their experiences of communication, attachment, and couples therapy as they understand it and the researcher then summarized and categorized this information into relevant themes, while considering how this information applies to marital therapists who work with couples. Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) described the main analytic process in qualitative research as being comparison, which involves the researcher using comparison to build and refine categories, define conceptual similarities, find negative evidence, and discover patterns. Patton (2002) also recommended finding an appropriate balance between description and interpretation. To elaborate, sufficient description and direct quotations should be included to allow the reader to enter into the situations and thoughts of the participants, but description also needs to be balanced by analysis and interpretation so that it is manageable. Patton concluded this point by stating the following: "An interesting and readable report provides sufficient description to allow the reader to understand the basis for an interpretation, and sufficient interpretation to allow the reader to appreciate the description" (pp. 503-504).

The first step of data analysis in this study included reviewing and summarizing the information gathered from the demographic information form, which was filled out by each participant. A brief summary of this information is given in the "Participants" section of this chapter. The participants are then described more fully in chapter four- titled "An Introduction to the Couples."

After the semi-structured interviews were transcribed, they were subsequently analyzed to determine what recurring themes and sub-themes existed in the data. The data analysis used in this study was influenced by Lanigan (1988, 1992) and Patton (1990, 2002). For instance, these authors' suggestions on how to organize, analyze, and interpret interview data were taken into consideration when conducting the data analysis process. Lanigan's (1992) method can be further described as following the steps of description, reduction, and interpretation. In the first step, the procedure involves describing the interpersonal conscious experience. In this study, the description is provided in the transcribed interviews with participants, who have provided their own subjective account of communicating with their partners. Patton (2002) noted that doing all or some of your own interview transcriptions provide an opportunity to get immersed in the data, which can generate emergent insights. The researcher transcribed eight of the 10 interviews and documented any ideas or insights that occurred during the transcriptions. A professional transcriber who agreed to treat the data with confidentiality transcribed the other two interviews.

The second step of data analysis includes abstracting or reducing the interpersonal experiences of the participants to define the facts they have described. Lanigan (1992, pp. 36-37) stated that in the reduction phase, the researcher would use emotions to define the "facts" represented in the participants' descriptions. The researcher would then determine that these "facts" are more complicated than they seem and that they are mediated by the researcher's emotional/expressive perspective. Wolff (2002) used Lanigan's methodological approach and he used reduction in his study by first finding emergent themes in each separate interview by looking for "clusters of statements that coalesce

around a central theme" (p. 97). Next, Wolff searched for themes across respondents' descriptions that were more encompassing of the entire group. He then searched for one or two phrases that captured the experience in a revealing manner.

In the current study, the researcher followed Wolff's example by first reducing each participant's transcribed interview into emerging themes. Then, each participant's themes were compared to the larger group to look for those themes that were all encompassing and represented a shared experience of all the participants. As well, since couples are the focus of this study, this researcher decided to do a "cross- case comparison" of themes emerging between each couple so that their experiences could be more accurately defined. The other cross-case comparisons that were made included comparing the males with the females to determine if there were themes that arose that were specific to each gender. Patton (2002) described this process as making "...cross-case descriptive comparisons aimed at enhancing understanding rather than explaining 'why'" (p. 478). Patton further suggested that through these cross-case analyses, one can make comparisons and consider causes, consequences, and relationships. However, these statements need to be clearly qualified as interpretations and hypothesizing. Patton (2002) also suggested to first "get a sense of the data" before proceeding with analysis to both check out the quality of the data you have collected and to get a whole picture of what information is in the data. The researcher accomplished this by reading over the transcriptions and summarizing them into the researcher's own words.

The third step of data analysis is interpretation, which involves "...interpreting the meaning of the reduction of the description" (Lanigan, 1992, p. 37). Patton (2002) defined interpretation as the following:

> Interpretation, by definition, involves going beyond the descriptive data. Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world. (p. 480)

Hence, the interpretation phase includes extrapolating meaning from the reduced version of the information that was described by the participants. It is at this stage where explanations are made and conclusions are drawn to help the reader make sense of the information.

Wolff (2002) described using Lanigan's interpretation process as explaining how one or two phrases are so revelatory that they define the phenomenon and tie all the themes together. Therefore, Wolff identified the essential thematic categories and then discussed the sub-themes within each category. The current researcher also used this format, where the overall themes that seemed to best represent the data were presented and then the sub-themes were discussed to help the reader gain a better understanding of how all the themes were tied together.

Trustworthiness/ Dependability of Data

Merriam (2002) described a number of factors that constitute a "quality" qualitative study that can be trusted and useful. The current study used the following strategies to ensure that the data are trustworthy and dependable: 1) member checks, 2) peer review, 3) audit trail, and 4) being submerged in data collection for a long enough period to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Maxwell (2003) pointed out that in interpretive research, the most central aspect of understanding is to

comprehend phenomena on the basis of the perspective of the participants. As such, Maxwell noted the importance of grounding the findings in the language of the participants and relying as much as possible on their own words and concepts. Patton (2002) also warned against not overgeneralizing from purposeful samples to ensure that the reader has the appropriate context for interpreting and understanding the findings.

A member check is a strategy used to ensure that the interpretation of the data is an accurate representation of the participants' experiences. The researcher incorporated a member check by summarizing the transcripts into approximately six or seven pages and asking the participants to read them over and provide any further comments or clarifications on the researcher's interpretation. Once any new and/or edited information was received, such changes were incorporated into the transcripts before proceeding with the data analysis.

The peer review process is a strategy used where researchers ask their colleagues to provide them with feedback regarding the data and whether the findings are plausible based on the data. Given that this researcher is a graduate student, the peer review process is built into the dissertation committee as each member reads and comments on the findings. The following topics have been discussed with the researcher's committee throughout the study: new developments, decisions, possible arising themes, data collection, and data analysis strategies. The committee also provided the researcher with feedback and suggestions after each chapter was written and these changes were subsequently incorporated into this dissertation.

An audit trail is a written record of how the study has progressed over time and what the researcher was contemplating about in order to come to certain decisions about

how to conduct the study. Acting upon direction from the dissertation committee, this researcher has kept a journal documenting any thoughts or decisions made in regards to research questions, method, participant group, procedures, and findings during this whole process. Any meetings that have occurred with this researcher's committee have also been documented so that this researcher can refer back to what was discussed if necessary and/or help the members of the committee understand what decisions were made and the logic behind those decisions. In doing so, this researcher can demonstrate that the findings are dependable and that this study is a trustworthy one.

Lastly, this researcher was engaged in the data collection process for an extended period of time to ensure that an in-depth understanding of the topics of couple communication, attachment, and marital therapy had been gained. The participants were also interviewed until the emerging findings felt saturated. In other words, this researcher began to hear the same types of responses over and over again and no new information was surfacing.

Ethical Considerations

A number of ethical considerations were taken into account during the process of this study. Prior to commencing the collection of data, the researcher submitted an application for the approval of this study to the Ethics Review Board in the Department of Educational Psychology. Approval was granted and maintained throughout the duration of the study.

The privacy and confidentiality of the participants was also protected throughout the study. There was no identifying information used and the participants were assigned code names. Any personal information provided by the participants to the researcher,

such as names, addresses, and telephone numbers were kept in a locked cabinet and were then destroyed upon the completion of this study. As well, the digital files used for the interviews were also destroyed when they were no longer needed and they were kept on the hard drive of the researcher's computer in the meantime. To add, the individual who transcribed a few of the interviews was required to abide by a strict oath of confidentiality in order to provide this service to the researcher.

As well, the researcher contacted the participants on the telephone prior to them consenting to participate in the research. The nature, purpose, and intent of the research was explained and the participants were informed that participation in the research was completely voluntary and that they had a right to refuse to participate and/or to withdraw from the research at any point without any adverse consequences to them. When the participants agreed to participate, the information that was explained to them on the telephone was reiterated in person and the participants were also given a letter of information to read that discussed the above concepts. They were then asked to sign an informed consent form and this researcher signed as a witness.

Lastly, the participants were given a list of counselling agency referrals to access should they find that any of the information discussed evoked any difficult thoughts or emotions that they wanted to further explore. To add, prior to commencing the interview, the participants were reminded that they did not have to talk about anything they did not want to and that they could terminate the interview at any time should they not want to continue any further.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Introduction to Couples

John and Jessica

The first couple that participated in this study was John and Jessica. John is a 34 year-old Caucasian male and Jessica is a 30 year-old Caucasian female. They both have a college level education and John is a territory manager for a distribution company and Jessica is a travel agent. They have been in a relationship for 6 years and they have been married for 2 years. Jessica was previously married and she brought one female child into the relationship. This is John's first marriage and together he and Jessica have two children, one girl and one boy. John and Jessica have participated in couples counselling for approximately 2 years. At the time of their interviews, they indicated that they anticipated attending approximately six more sessions of therapy.

This researcher's initial impression of John and Jessica was that they were both very friendly and outgoing people. They both laughed a great deal in their interviews and they seemed to make light of situations whenever possible. They also both presented as struggling somewhat with the level of stress in their lives, as they are a young couple with three young children. At the time of their participation, Jessica was on maternity leave taking care of their baby son and John was working full-time. It occurred to this researcher that they struggled with achieving balance in their lives, as John seemed overwhelmed with his job responsibilities and Jessica appeared overwhelmed with managing the household responsibilities. At the same time, they seemed to have an appreciation for how hard each other was working to contribute to the family and they spoke about one another in a respectful manner. It seemed to this researcher that they had

a good sense of what their communication problems were and that their personality similarities sometimes led to them "butting heads" on important issues.

They both seemed to be pleased with their couples counselling experiences and it appeared to be helping them function both as a couple and a family. Their attendance in therapy seemed to wax and wane, where they would reduce their attendance when they were not experiencing any problems and then increase their attendance if they felt themselves slipping back into old, negative patterns.

Colin and Cathy

The second couple that participated in this study was Colin and Cathy. Colin is a 39 year-old Caucasian male and Cathy is a 37 year-old Caucasian female. They both reported having a high school diploma. Colin is a manager of a transport company and Cathy is an administrative supervisor at a manufacturing company. They have been in a relationship for 11 years and have been living common-law for 10 years. Cathy was previously married and brought two girls into her current relationship. Colin does not have any biological children of his own. Cathy has not officially divorced her previous partner and he has regular contact with the children. Cathy indicated that she has been to court several times to address child support, custody, and access issues. They stated that they had participated in couples counselling on and off for several years (approximately 6 years). They had also recently completed a "Couples Communication" workshop, as well as a "Succeeding as a Step Family" workshop.

Colin and Cathy presented as being aware of the issues they needed to work on and they both seemed conscious of the mistakes that they were making in how they communicated. They very much used the "counselling lingo" and appeared to be making

honest attempts to use the skills that they had learned through their participation in counselling and workshops. While Colin appeared to be committed to working through the relationship issues, Cathy seemed to be at a more contemplative stage, where she was questioning whether she wanted to pursue the relationship further. A stress factor in their relationship appeared to be the presence of Cathy's ex-husband, who was described by both Colin and Cathy as creating many significant difficulties for them. As well, Colin and Cathy appeared to have different perceptions about the level of intimacy in their relationship and it was an area that they did not seem to talk about in great detail.

Colin and Cathy noted that they initially entered couples counselling to deal with issues that they could not resolve on their own. They both indicated that it has been very helpful over the years, but that they realized that it was something that they needed to maintain, or else they would revert back to their negative, and sometimes destructive, behaviour patterns. Their recent participation in workshops appeared to provide them with some "refresher" skills and reminded them of knowledge about communication and relationship functioning that they had either forgotten about or purposely stopped using.

Rob and Rebecca

Rob is a 39 year-old Caucasian male and Rebecca is a 38 year-old Caucasian female. Rob has a high school diploma and Rebecca has a college diploma. Rob is employed as an operations supervisor at a distribution company and Rebecca is a self-employed massage therapist who works out of the family home. They have been in a relationship for 11 years and married for 7 years. Rebecca was previously married and divorced before she met Rob. She has two girls from her previous marriage and she and Rob had one girl together. An interesting aspect to their relationship is that they dated in

junior high and then got together again later as adults. They reported that they attended approximately 10 sessions of couples counselling and they were unsure whether they were going to continue with therapy much further. Rob also had a problem with alcohol use and was attending AA meetings on his own. Rebecca stated that she would join Rob once in awhile at these meetings.

While Rebecca seemed to appreciate the couples counselling experiences, Rob appeared to have a pessimistic attitude towards therapy. Rebecca seemed willing to identify and address their relationship issues, whereas Rob presented as wanting to end the sessions. Rob indicated that he did not feel as though he was getting enough "concrete" information, such as specific skills and techniques that the two of them could use to resolve their relationship problems. Rebecca also appeared frustrated with Rob's expectation that she attend AA meetings with him. She expressed what seemed to be discontentment with how Rob's issue with alcohol was impacting her life even though it was not her issue per se.

Pete and Patricia

The fourth couple that participated in this study was Pete and Patricia. Pete is a 40 year-old Caucasian male and Patricia is a 38 year-old Caucasian female. Pete is a heavy equipment operator with a master's degree and Patricia is an auditor for a government branch with some post-secondary education. They have been in a relationship for 2 years and they have been living common-law for about a year. Pete was married previously and he has three girls from that marriage. His divorce is currently pending. Patricia was married twice before. She was widowed in her first marriage and separated from her second husband. She has one boy and one girl from her second marriage. Her children

live with she and Pete full-time. Pete has very limited contact with his children, as they live with their mother and the contact has been restricted. Pete comes from a very religious background and divorce is seen as unacceptable in his family. He also noted that his children, themselves, have indicated that they do not want contact with him because their church does not favor his new lifestyle (i.e., living with a woman and not being married). Both Pete and Patricia plan on getting married as soon as possible (i.e., when their divorces are finalized).

Both Pete and Patricia have taken several communication and self-improvement courses. They also recently attended a "Succeeding as a Step Family" workshop. As well, Pete attended a "Men and Anger" group shortly before being interviewed. While they attended couples counselling briefly near the beginning of their relationship, Pete is now more focused on attending individual counselling to address some personal issues. They also prefer to attend courses and workshops together now instead of going to couples counselling because they are both avid learners and they are open to learning new skills that will help them as a couple and a blended family.

Pete and Patricia appear to be quite happy in their relationship currently. Despite having some initial problems with communication, they appear to have established some communication patterns that work for them. They also appear to be quite open and honest in their communication and to be in a stage of their relationship where they are very happy, they know each other well, and they feel they are well-suited for one another. They both presented as quite intellectual, philosophical, and highly aware individuals. They seemed to have a good understanding about communication concepts and they also appeared to continuously evaluate their thoughts and behaviours to ensure that they

continued using these skills. One area of contention for the both of them appeared to be Pete's family's disapproval of Patricia and for he having broken what his family considers to be the traditional view of "marriage." Patricia appeared frustrated with being treated like an outsider and not being accepted freely into Pete's family of origin.

Sam and Sarah

The fifth and final couple that participated in this study was Sam and Sarah. Sam is a 35 year-old Caucasian male and Sarah is a 28 year-old Caucasian female. They both have a college education. Sam is an inventory clerk at a distribution company and Sarah is an account manager, but she is currently at home and pregnant, awaiting the birth of their first child together. Sam has one daughter from a previous marriage and Sarah also has two girls from a previous relationship (although she was not previously married). They have been together for just over a year and they have lived common-law for about 8 months. Sarah's two daughters live with them full-time and Sam has infrequent visits with his daughter (approximately once or twice a month). They recently began couples counselling and have attended approximately six sessions so far. Sam is also attending concurrent individual counselling.

This researcher's impressions of Sam and Sarah are that they are still very much learning about each other's communication style. While it seems as though they have established some patterns that appear effortless, they are also attempting to figure out what issues are theirs as a couple and what issues may have been carried over from their previous relationships. It appears to this researcher that they have totally different communication styles and that they have to do what does not come naturally to them in order to make communication work. They also appear to be having some issues in terms

of what type of a step-parenting role Sam will play with Sarah's children. Interestingly, neither one of them spoke about how their new child would impact their relationship and/or the family structure.

Both Sam and Sarah appeared to be feeling hopeful about their couples counselling experiences and they seem to be placing a great deal of effort into developing their relationship. Sarah indicated that she believes that Sam has some unresolved issues in regards to his previous relationship that are creating some explosive anger in him. She noted that their relationship would be going smoothly for awhile and then Sam would "turn into a monster" and become quite angry for a few days in a row. While Sarah stated that she initially felt responsible for bringing the anger out in Sam, she explored her own behaviour through self-help books and realized that she, herself, was not an angry person and was not evoking this feeling in Sam. Sarah then urged Sam to address his issues because she felt they were impacting their relationship as a couple. Sam then began individual counselling and after that they began couples counselling. They indicated that they have noticed some improvements in their relationship already and that they are looking forward to attending more counselling.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of communication and attachment of partners in distressed intimate relationships, as well as how marital therapy/couples counselling was perceived as helpful in improving both communication and attachment within such relationships. In keeping with the data analysis techniques of Lanigan (1988, 1992) and Patton (2002), the themes generated from all the participants as a group, as well as the cross-case comparisons, will be presented below. These themes will then be interpreted and placed into the context of the literature on these topics in the Discussion chapter.

This chapter will be organized according to the themes that arose from the interview data that have been further delineated into the three larger categories of communication, attachment, and couples counselling. A flow chart is first presented to guide the reader as to how the themes were created and subsequently reduced into a manageable number. A table summarizing the themes will be inserted at the beginning of each section to provide a visual depiction and reference to the reader. The themes and sub-themes that arose amongst all the participants will be presented throughout each larger category. As well, the themes that arose in the cross-case analyses of men and women, which denote any gender differences, will also be presented within these categories. Any notable findings that arose within each particular couple will also be highlighted throughout. The findings will be presented with a combination of direct quotations from the participants to give the reader some examples of the rich descriptions the participants provided through the interview process, along with the researcher's

interpretation of these descriptions. At the end of each section there will be a short paragraph summarizing the key findings.

Thematic Analysis Process

As mentioned in the Method chapter, the interviews that were conducted with each partner were analyzed into themes. The themes that arose amongst the whole group of participants were identified first and then those themes or sub-themes that were specific to either the males or the females were identified next. Within this process, any significant findings that arose within a particular couple were also noted. Please see the flow chart in Appendix E for a visual depiction of how the themes were derived.

Communication

To address the research questions regarding couple communication, this section will be divided into two sub-categories: a) Barriers to Communication and b) Effective Communication, as a natural division arose amongst these two areas. The themes that arose in the area of communication will be presented within these two categories. In the Barriers to Communication section, the participants discussed their experiences that made communication difficult and in the Effective Communication section, the participants discussed their experiences that made communication work well between them. Please see Table 1 for a summary of themes within these communication categories.

Table 1

Summary of Communication Themes

Barriers to Communication	**Effective Communication**
Differing Perceptions, Personalities and Communication Styles	Positive Communication Indicators
Conflict Strategies	Similar Beliefs/Personalities
Avoidance Tactics	Feeling Safe to Communicate
Spillover and Baggage	Verification of the Message
Gender Issues	Connecting Through Body Language and Touch
	Self-Awareness and Partner Empathy

Barriers to Communication

In exploring the experiences of communication among the participants, they identified those aspects of their communication that acted as barriers or interfered with the communication process. These themes regarding barriers to communication are presented below.

Differing Perceptions, Personalities, and Communication Styles.

The participants discussed the aspects of communication that created difficulties for them and it became evident that they all perceived many differences existed between they and their partners in terms of how they perceived situations, their personality styles, and/or their communication styles. Their different perceptions revolved around issues such as how they interpreted each other's messages, their ideas of how to manage money, what their partner expected from them, different priorities about what is important,

different ideas about the roles that they play in the family, and not understanding one another very well based on life experiences. For instance, Rebecca talked about perception differences that have led to miscommunications.

> *We do notice that one person will say something thinking that they'll, the other person will understand it and they don't and we find that out later. You know, like, it's been miscommunicated. So, we have some differences I guess in how we interpret things.*

Colin discussed how his miscommunications with Cathy could escalate quickly into arguments.

> *Usually it's a miscommunication- you know, I said something and she thought it meant something, but, you know, I meant A, but she heard B and as I said, on a good day it's mildly irritating to her, but it escalates quickly from one of those button-pushing things that happens and it doesn't take her much to get it going up over the top of that hill.*

In Sarah's case, she expressed miscommunications based on how she thinks Sam wants her to respond to him, rather than he accepting her response at face value.

> *I will say something and he thinks he's hearing something else. Like, that is so not what I said! You know, one of those conversations. I think it's almost like he asks a question and he wants me to answer it in a specific way and I don't, but he reacts like I did. ... You know, it's like, you're not giving me anything, so I'm going to keep asking you questions until you are giving me something of what I'm looking for, you know?*

Jessica discussed how she and John have different perceptions about what is important to communicate about and where they each place their priorities. On the other hand, Patricia described how she and Pete misinterpret each other based on their different cultures and life experiences.

> *I think sometimes the communication gets stunted because we're trying to mesh two vastly different cultures and he doesn't understand mine and I don't understand his and so, often, on those occasions when we, you know, we're trying to mesh them together, I don't know where he's coming from, like I'm not getting it and he's not getting it and so it can take quite some time before one of us says*

> *something that both people can recognize as "Oh, that's the issue!" because you know, we're running everything from our own experience grids and I've experienced things that he'll never experience and he's experienced things that I don't ever want to experience.*

Interestingly, Pete made a similar comment about how they will often "miss each other on a relational level" due to having different life experiences.

> *And sometimes, you know what? She'll even say, "You know, I hear what you're saying, but not having gone through the same experience with you, I don't really get it." Because, for example, we have incredibly different religious backgrounds. I grew up in a very religious family and she basically without any. So, if I tell a story about what I've experienced in the church or whatever, she'll go, "Well, I hear the story, but I have no basis to relate on, so it's a world that I can't really relate to." Well, I still know I'm being heard, it's just we both recognize that on a relational level, we're missing each other. And that's ok.*

In terms of personality style differences, some of the participants discussed how their conflicting personality styles, as well as differences in the way they express feelings and deal with situations sometimes created communication barriers for them. For example, Rebecca discussed how the different ways that she and Rob deal with anger creates conflict.

> *It probably takes a little longer for me to let go of my anger than it does for him. I can't, you know, switch on and off, like he seems to be able to do. So, I probably linger a bit more. I'm sure it bothers him, but I guess it's just the difference in our personalities. He's just quick to get mad and quick to let it go and I'm kind of a "slow burner." It takes me awhile to get mad and a long while to let it go.*

Sarah discussed how communication could be difficult between she and Sam because they deal with problems differently.

> *I don't know if I have a stronger self-image of myself maybe. Like, I'm a bit more sure of myself and I'm comfortable enough to talk to the people, like my family and my friends that can upset me. I'm ok with telling you that cause I know that it's my way of making myself feel better I guess and letting you know how I'm feeling, whereas he doesn't need to do that, like it's not that he doesn't need to, I don't know if he knows how to, you know, constructively. ... I don't know if he has a different personality type than me, but he's more the quiet, don't stir the pot type*

> *and I guess I like stirring the pot. So, that's what makes communicating with each other difficult too because he's very opposite that way.*

John, on the other hand, mentioned that he and Jessica have some similar personality traits (e.g., stubborn, opinionated), but that they manifest these traits in differing ways.

> *We have a lot of similar traits. We're both pretty stubborn or both pretty opinionated and I think compared to her, I'm a little bit, my way of dealing with things are annoying and her ways can be annoying and that can be sometimes a source of a communication breakdown or an argument, something like that. She thinks I'm crazy sometimes and I know she's crazy! We both have our different ways, obviously. And sometimes that gets in the way and can create a small problem into a bigger problem.*

Interestingly, Jessica also mentioned that both she and John are stubborn. However, in her case, she seemed to notice how John sometimes uses his stubbornness to justify shutting down instead of addressing an issue.

> *Well, with our personality types, it can cause a lot of problems because I'm very outspoken which can cause problems because it just causes a lot of differences of opinion and so you have to deal with, you know, sometimes you have to just agree to disagree. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion and I'm very strong and opinionated and I can be very stubborn as well, which, that also can hinder communication sometimes. ... Like, he'll have an opinion, but instead of voicing the opinion, he'll come across and shut down instead of explaining. And then that's it.*

In addition to personality styles, some of the participants discussed how differences in their communication styles can become barriers to effective communication. Pete, in particular, demonstrated a high level of awareness about how his body language changes when he is processing an issue internally.

> *Maybe it's my tone of voice or a look on my face that says I'm feeling something that I'm not- not only with her, but with a lot of people. The interesting thing is that people can read my body language pretty quickly and probably can tell when I'm angry or depressed or frustrated- just by the way I carry myself. I speak through my shoulders a lot- if they're slumped or tight. But, I think I am misinterpreted sometimes too because when I get particularly thoughtful and emotional at the same time, my face clouds- I'll scowl or and really what's*

> *happening is I'm thinking, but people often interpret that as anger or frustration or something like that and so, um, there have been cases or the way I'll say something, especially if I'm tired, it's just sort of to the point.*

John also described how Jessica's style of explaining her point of view in many different ways tends to "drag out" the conversation longer than necessary.

> *... And, one thing that does bother me when we're talking is, it seems in my opinion, when she's trying to explain something, she'll explain it from sixteen points of view from how she wants me to understand and you know that does get frustrating after awhile and then it tends to drag things out a little longer.... I think, personally, when she's trying to explain her point of view and her three hundred and sixty degrees of it, it's this is how you're wrong from this angle and now this is how you're wrong in French and how the neighbours see it and my parents see it and my friends.*

Interestingly, Jessica seems to be aware that she explains herself, yet she seems to believe that her motivations for this are to avoid hurting John's feelings and pride.

> *Instead of having proper communication, it tends to, you usually end up with a wall up one way or another real quick, as, you know, just defensive. Especially for him; whereas, I'm pretty explanatory, I'll explain it. If I don't want to do something, I'll explain why not and give you a when, kind of thing. I'm not, I don't want to hurt your feelings. I know men's egos and I don't want to hurt the pride there so I'll explain a little bit more. Whereas, kind of the other way around, I think it's more, just, more of a little bit of a wall there. Just not as much explanation, I guess, or reason or saying maybe later or tomorrow or in the morning or whatever.*

Sam discussed how he would like Sarah to change her style somewhat when she is talking to him, as he feels she is more "upbeat" when she talks to strangers than him.

> *Well, when she's talking to a friend or a client, she's very, she's usually very upbeat and talks really nice to them and I kinda get jealous of that sometimes and I've asked her why she can talk to some total strangers that way and to me sometimes it's kind of monotone, no upbeat feeling or anything. You know? Like, more often than not, she'll talk to me like that on the phone. I've questioned her on that and she's denied it. She doesn't know what I'm talking about. It's nice to have her be happy to talk to me.*

Therefore, within this theme of differing perceptions, personalities, and communication styles, one begins to understand where some of the major difficulties arise in communication for these couples. Not only are they misunderstanding the intent of the messages they are trying to send, but they are also attempting to interpret each other's messages based on their different personalities and styles of communicating. In essence, it is as though they are speaking different languages at times and becoming increasingly frustrated with one another when they don't understand what is being communicated either verbally or non-verbally. Hence, the communication process becomes stunted and the relationship can become strained.

Conflict Strategies.

In discussing communication difficulties, all of the participants indicated having problems in the area of conflict resolution. The sub-themes included problem areas such as having difficulty managing feelings during a conflict, engaging in power struggles, not taking a "time out" from conflict when necessary, bringing up issues at inappropriate times, and engaging in a "demand-withdrawal" pattern of interaction during a conflict. For example, both Jessica and Rebecca discussed how anger can cause problems during conflicts and interfere with the use of the skills they previously learned. For instance, Rebecca stated:

> *If I'm angry, I don't use my skills because I forget, but you know, sort of coming back to try and talk about it the odd time, I'll try and say, "I feel when you this..." kind of thing. And you know, it does help, it's just the fact that you need to remember to use them and when you're angry you sort of don't remember those things.*

For Cathy, an increased level of anxiousness contributes to she and Colin being less likely to use their previously learned communication skills.

> *I think that we both know, have a good basis for the right communication style. It's a matter of remembering them while you're communicating when there's not any kind of anxiousness- be it excitement or anger or anything else, communication goes quite fine. As soon as you add something else into the mix, then all of the communication rules that we know tend to go out the door- as in the not interrupting, using "I feel statements", clarifying what you're hearing, not being presumptuous, not finishing sentences, all that tends to go right out the door. And, I think I notice it while it's happening. I just, one part of my brain says, "I don't care!" and the other part says, "You know you shouldn't be talking like this!" But the "I don't care" tends to overrule.*

Colin discussed how stress has a significant impact on his ability to communicate in his relationship.

> *I use the analogy of my "stress bucket." My "stress bucket"- I have a 40 gallon "stress bucket"- for the last 6 years, I've had 50 gallons of stress in there and so it tends to overflow and it runs down the sides and it gets on other people's shoes and you know, it doesn't take very much to make the lid do this [pop off], so you tend to pick up on the little things and it's the little things, it's not the big issues that are making the lid pop. You know, it's the little things that make the lid kinda pop and jump and stuff.*

Coincidentally, Cathy commented on Colin's analogy of the "stress bucket" and she appeared to be frustrated with this being an ongoing issue. She further discussed how when they have trouble managing their emotions, they tend to interrupt each other more.

> *Probably the biggest problem that we have is interrupting one another and assuming what the sentence is going to be or the other big one is, either a) repeating what you said multiple times so the person doesn't listen to it, or assuming what the person's going to say because the sentence started out the same and now you don't wanna listen to it because you just block your mind to being open to hearing what is said. Those are probably the two biggest, is assuming what's going to be happening and either blocking it or just not wanting to hear it at all. It goes back to the heightened situation. If it's a heightened situation, if it's not a real anxious, high emotion period of time, then there's no problem finishing each other's sentences. Neither of us seems to care per se. If it's a heightened emotional state or a heightened situation, then it becomes the exact opposite- you're not allowed to.*

Both Colin and Rob admitted to engaging in power struggles with their partners. For instance, Colin noted the following:

> *We're both fairly strong-willed. So, um, sometimes communication is kinda difficult in that sense. We tend to have a bit of power struggle between who's talking and who's listening. Neither one of us are particularly active listeners. We know what it means, but unfortunately, sometimes we just don't do it. So, it makes it hard sometimes. We're learning though. We're getting better.*

As well, Rob stated:

> *It's difficult to deal with her sometimes. She's pretty stubborn usually when she's set in something. She won't change her mind. It's very rarely that she'll change her mind. It's usually her way or forget it!*

Jessica talked about taking a time-out from John due to not wanting an argument to escalate in front of the children. In a similar vein, Sarah noted how taking a time out helps her to calm down and deal with her emotions.

> *I guess I've, not become the avoider, but I've become, the "ok, well, this is not worth arguing about", you know, and I'll give myself some space from him....And, at first, I kinda, I guess I sit and stew a little bit, I don't know...it sometimes helps with your emotions and I don't know...I guess it gives me time to think about, you know, my reaction to when he does leave. I'm not saying I don't react emotionally in the moment, because I don't think you really have time to think about it. I guess him leaving or giving me that time by taking it himself I guess gives me time to calm myself down and tell him how I'm feeling.*

Colin stated:

> *It was only in about the last 6 months that we've really started making meaningful progress in how we argue. Now, we both have learned to be able to kind of walk away and let it go over top of us- in one ear and out the other, so to speak, and again, being aware of how I'm feeling or how she's feeling, depending on who it is and knowing when to walk away and when not to follow. And when not to follow I think is a lot more important than when to walk away...*

Colin, John, and Rebecca identified the importance of raising issues at appropriate times. For example, Rebecca stated:

> *We need to make sure that, you know, we have the right variables to communicate properly, like the, just being the two of us in the room and nothing else happening and not trying to talk about something right before bed that's, you know, that's more important. We tend to struggle with picking the wrong time to talk about serious stuff.*

The last conflict strategy included some of the participants engaging in what has been identified in the literature as a "demand-withdrawal" pattern of communication, where one partner demands to talk about an issue and the other partner withdraws from the conversation. For instance, Cathy discussed the following:

> *I think both of us feel that the other one isn't giving us what we need. When it's me that's trying to talk and he wants to end it, I feel hurt or offended and I'm not ready to stop talking, so we're not going to stop talking. When he's ready to stop, that's it, cut it off, we're done talking and it sort of leaves you hanging. It leaves me hanging and it would be ok if we had some sort of follow up time maybe that we could, you know, cool off period, now we can talk about it again, but we never make it back to that point. So that's when I need, I feel the need to get out everything I want to say now. Though, it's I know what I'm doing isn't effective and neither is what he's doing. But it can also work the opposite way where I'm not ready to talk about something and he's pushing to talk about it and it'll just lead to problems because I don't want to talk about it yet and he's not willing to drop it until I'm ready.*

Sarah described a situation where she and Sam often switch roles in who is the "demanding" one and who is "withdrawing" from the interaction when they deal with issues.

> *I see him as the avoider and then the blower-upper...it's kind of a weird circle because really I go from being verbal and he goes from being quiet and then we kind of switch roles, you know? Whereas, he's verbal and me, I'm not the avoider, but the "Ok, I've dealt with it," by you know? ... So, of course, he's all upset, whereas, I'm like, ok, well in my mind the conversation is kinda over. I'm past that. I talked to the walls and they understand. It's all good!*

These participants seem to be aware that some of the behaviours they have engaged in are not helpful (e.g., becoming defensive, having power struggles, bringing up issues at inappropriate times). In particular, the participants seem to realize that taking that "time-out" or "cooling down period" is essential to having any type of productive conversation. Interestingly, Colin and Cathy also recognized that although they know they should allow each other this time, they sometimes follow each other around the house

instead of giving each other the necessary space to deal with their emotions. As well, Cathy and Sarah noticed that their partners are not always ready to talk when they are and vice versa, which appears to be a frustrating and confusing situation for them. On a positive note, these participants appeared to become aware of the importance of first reducing their heightened emotional states and then returning to the communication process when they have calmed down and are thinking more rationally.

Avoidance Tactics.

The entire group of participants also discussed tactics they used to avoid communicating about a certain issue, such as choosing not to address recurring unresolved issues, using the "silent treatment," and using deception to hide certain behaviour. Since some of the couples engaged in a pattern of avoiding issues, they noticed that the same issues kept creeping into their conversations on a consistent basis. For instance, Rebecca and Rob agreed that they have a recurring pattern of avoiding issues. As Rebecca stated:

> *...There are a few issues that keep coming up in our marriage and just kind of keep coming back. Like I said, not dealing with things that we should have talked about once we're less angry about it. We just sort of push it under the rug and then wait till the next time and then it of course comes up again. So, it doesn't really get dealt with.*

Sarah noted that her issues with Sam seem to get dealt with to a certain degree, but they then arise again, which indicates to her that they haven't been resolved after all.

> *Sometimes it will just come up again, the same conversation it seems, but at that time I guess you've had more time to think about it from the time before and sometimes things don't always seem like they get, what's the word, they usually get dealt with to a point, but never really like, "Ok we've dealt with this, we can move on."*

Patricia appears to realize that she learned avoidance tactics from her past relationship and she seems to feel as though Pete challenges her to grow in her communication style.

> *Usually what will happen is I learned from my past relationship is you never say anything. Just don't talk and you can't get in trouble, if you don't talk about anything. So, what will tend to happen is I'll just withdraw around certain issues. That's the avoider in me and I am the classic ostrich. I've got my head in the sand all the time. I just want to ignore stuff and it doesn't go away, but he'll pick up on that it will be, "Is everything all right? Did I do something or say something? Or I'm sensing that these plans aren't working for you." Or whatever it is. Um, it's always a really gentle approach and sometimes I don't even realize that I'm in that withdraw mode until he says something because he is so far from being an avoider and I think that's what works, is because our styles complement each other. He is not afraid to confront anything that comes up and he does it right here, right now.*

Ironically, Pete does not even seem to be aware of when Patricia is avoiding. However, he did seem to be aware that she may be attempting to send him a message through her body language when she is avoiding talking about something.

> *Usually, I'm the one who identifies that there's a problem because I can read it in her and so I'll say, "Hey, what's up?" And then we can talk about whatever the issue is and whether it's about us or the kids or something happened at work today or whatever, because as an avoider, she doesn't want to, she's not going to come barreling into the room and tell you, "I'm pissed off because of such and such" She'll come barreling into the room and start throwing cupboards open and closed and making a lot of noise to get you to realize, "I'm upset and I need to talk about this!" If I'm upset, I show it in my body language a lot too and she'll pick it up and say, "Hey, are you ok?" But, I will also be more quick to actually just say it, even before she might pick up on it.*

Another avoidance tactic used by some of the couples (i.e., Cathy and Colin, Rob and Rebecca, and John and Jessica) appeared to be using the "silent treatment," where they would stop talking to one another for hours, or sometimes days, at a time. For instance, Cathy described the process of how her conflicts with Colin often escalated and then turned into giving each other the "silent treatment."

> *We go down a bad path just about every time. You start speaking while the other person is speaking and we both are prone to that. We're prone to finishing sentences, to blocking the other one, to cutting them off, to... yeah, it just gets higher and higher and then louder and louder. So, the extent of, until it reaches usually swearing and yelling and then the silent treatment for some period of time. It can either be short or days long.*

It also appeared as though Rob and Rebecca use the "silent treatment" as a key pattern in their communication. Rebecca had the following comments to make about what the situation is like when she and Rob are giving each other the "silent treatment" and how it comes to an end:

> *We're not talking and yeah, we're just not talking and neither one of us knows what's going on with the other person and he doesn't know what's going on in the family because I'm sort of the one that, you know, keeps things running smoothly, like, you know, something may have happened at school, he won't know about because he doesn't get home until later and the kids don't generally, they would tell me because I'm here when they get home. So, yeah, so that's what it looks like, we're not talking to each other and we sort of carry on with our daily activities until someone cracks [laughs].*

Rebecca then talked about how even when they do begin talking again; they have a very difficult time resolving the issue due to their use of avoidance.

> *It's a little bit frustrating because we're both similar in the way that we deal with conflict and both of us have a hard time with resolution. So, it ends up being, you know, sometimes hours or even days of not speaking to each other if we've had an argument and neither one of us really wants to address the issue and I've found that, you know, at times that if I do address the issue, that there's a lot of past stuff that comes up as well and, you know, I realize that if the issues don't get dealt with, that they will keep coming up, but it's like a, it's a pattern and it's sort of a thing that I don't know how to stop. So, and we both do that so it's not a case of, you know, one deals with it this way and one deals with it that way, it's like we both have the same way of non-dealing- not dealing with conflict. So, it's a little bit frustrating.*

However, Rob seems to see Rebecca as the one who initiates the silence and himself as the one to end the silence. He appears quite frustrated by this pattern.

> *She'll just not talk and I don't like that. I can't, I need to talk. I try to forget- not forget, but forgive and forget as soon as possible. I'd sooner do that than be mad. Usually, I'll fight it and not talk to her for awhile. Then, eventually I'll give in or whatever. It's not worth the not talking for a day or two. Yeah, I don't like that so much. Usually I'll back off for a little bit and try again. I guess it depends on how mad I was when we had the fight or the argument and you know, that will decide how many times I'll try to talk to her.*

Rob then discussed how he views Rebecca's silence as an indication that the relationship is not important to her.

> *It makes me feel like she doesn't want to try, that she's carrying a grudge- that I don't like, I don't carry a grudge. It's not good for you and you know, the kids see it. I feel that it's not worth throwing away the relationship over something like that and she just doesn't seem to care about our relationship when she does that. You know, I want to resolve it as soon as possible or at least talk about it. It's pretty discouraging when she won't talk or she'll talk, but she'll say that she's still mad.*

Jessica also discussed how she and John move beyond their conflict and "go back to normal." However, she first gives him the "silent treatment" by ignoring him for a few days and it does not appear as though the issue was ever resolved.

> *Well, I just get angry at him starting to swear and stuff in front of the kids and I get frustrated because he won't have a conversation or won't deal with the actual issue and just at the defensiveness. So, then, I get angry at that. I want to get to the bottom of it, but he won't listen to me, which gets me frustrated. And usually nothing happens and I end up ignoring him for a few days and then it wears off and things just go back to normal.*

Another avoidance tactic that was described by two female participants (Cathy and Rebecca) included their partners' use of deception to avoid discussing certain issues or topics with them. Cathy stated that Colin was not honest with her for a long time about his drug use, as he knew that she had very negative opinions about it. Rebecca had a similar addiction issue with Rob drinking too much and then later hiding it to avoid a conflict from ensuing.

> *Alcohol has come up before as a problem where, you know, he's tried to hide, like, you know, he's had a few beers and I'll come downstairs and the cans will be in the bookshelf. You know what I mean? So, he's trying to hide it from me because he knows I'll be angry, but it makes me more angry when I realize he's hiding it!*

Thus, there were a number of ways that the couples avoided issues, which placed barriers in the way of their ability to communicate. Instead of resolving issues as they arose, they put them aside and then these same issues would arise on a recurring basis. As well, when some of the couples became so frustrated with not resolving an issue, they would give each other the "silent treatment" in what seemed to be a "last resort" to get a point across. However, they seemed to soon realize that it was difficult to continue avoiding one another, especially considering they had busy lives and children to parent. Cathy and Rebecca also described how even though their partners' deceptive behaviours might have been used as avoidance tactics; these women instead developed trust issues and feelings of frustration towards their partners.

Spillover and Baggage.

Another theme that arose as a communication barrier for all of the participants included "spillover," such as work, children, and stress interfering with effective communication because the partners do not have enough time to manage all of their responsibilities or they are feeling overwhelmed by everything that is happening in their lives. As well, old relationship issues commonly referred to as "baggage" sometimes interfered with the couples' ability to communicate well. Such "baggage" could come in the form of unresolved emotional issues with former spouses and/or with how one partner's biological family was reacting to the new partner after a previous divorce occurred.

In discussing "spillover" issues, Jessica discussed how taking care of the children, John's work, and lack of time often interfere with their communication.

> *Having the time for it is a big one. Just actually having that time to actually have a conversation, a full conversation and see what's important at each time and to really have a full conversation, period. And see what's important to each other...*

Jessica expressed that she thinks John's work has actually changed the way he communicates with her.

> *...And so, that frustration from work, I think, of making people happy when he doesn't want to, I think, is coming home. And, so, he's giving, giving, giving at work even when you don't want to, so that resentment is coming home and he doesn't want to give anymore, almost. He doesn't want to be nice anymore... I think that was a big change in communication.*

Rebecca also confirmed that some of the issues she and Rob have "spill over" into other areas of their lives.

> *We have an issue with money sometimes and alcohol. So, and trust, trust in terms of the alcohol. Like, it's related to that. These issues create problems for us in how well we talk to each other and communicate.*

Sam also talked about how his job and all the activities the children are involved in spills over into their relationship.

> *...And, when it comes to spending time alone with just the two of us, well that is hard to do when you have so many other things going on.*

In terms of carrying previous relationship "baggage" into their current communication with their partners, both Cathy and Patricia admitted that this was a concern in their relationships. For instance, Cathy stated:

> *... My ex probably does affect a lot of the things I do because he's not a good communicator and he does wreak havoc and he uses my weaknesses against me. So, I tend to get my hackles up if I feel like anybody else is doing that too, because of my feelings towards him.*

Patricia discussed how both she and Pete had to learn how to communicate with one another because their previous baggage often interfered with their communication.

> *We know where we lack and so we, you know, come right out and tell the other guy, you know, "This doesn't work really well for me in this kind of situation because of my baggage" or you know, societal stuff... We knew exactly what we would not ever stand for again- like guilt, manipulation-type guilt, the cold shoulder, you know, withholding favors, you know? Like neither one of us feel that that's an appropriate way to treat anybody, so we don't.*

Pete described how he and Patricia have made a great deal of progress in this area, because they take responsibility for their own "baggage" that is occurring.

> *I think we have come a long way and we both know our own tendency to, like when you're in the heat of the moment, let's say you're angry or something and you just kinda lash out and neither of us does that anymore. Like, we just rather would sit back and say, "You know what, I think I need some time to work this out internally before we talk about it." It doesn't feel forced or fake or anything. It feels good because you know, probably she does this more than I do, but it's really impressed me that she'll be able to say, "I think I've got some baggage here I'm dealing with, can I just have some time to sort it out and then come back" and then she can say either, "Yeah, this is me" or "This is what I'm frustrated with with you."*

Patricia described what she has learned from her previous "baggage" and how she may have made subtle changes to her communication style without realizing it, based on the fact that she has changed her partner.

> *... So I may have changed, I don't think I have, but I might be a little bit more willing to step back and look at the broad picture because I know that I'm not being met with that distrust or hostility or defense.*

As such, in regards to both the "spillover" and "baggage" issues described by these couples, it is understandable how the communication process becomes more complicated because the partners are dealing with external factors that interfere with communicating. In particular, John and Jessica are dealing with young children and it appears as though they have little time for one another and communication happens sparingly as a result.

Pete and Patricia, on the other hand, seem to be dealing with different issues, such as Pete's family not accepting Patricia into the family based on her religion and her status as the "new partner." While the interference issues may be quite different from couple to couple, there is a commonality in their experiences of feeling frustrated about external factors making communication between them more difficult.

Gender Issues.

Another theme that arose in the area of communication barriers for all of the participants was gender differences in how the partners communicated with one another. Both the men and the women noticed gender differences in their communication, yet the women made more comments in this area than the men. One couple's comments (Pete and Patricia) deviated from the other participants and these will be presented last. Interestingly, both male and female participants in this study recognized that the men had a tendency to display male aggression/domination behaviours at times. For instance, Jessica had the following to say about John acting like he had what she referred to as "big man syndrome:"

> *Somewhat just in the fact of, basically, not quite the words to put in it, but almost "big man syndrome." The guy thinks in an argument where they're the bigger ones so they're the more aggressive, more powerful, more dominating one. Wanting to get more controlling and more in your face just because I'm a lot smaller and so there's the whole battle there because he's the man, the "big man." You're the "little woman."*

Jessica then talked about how she has come to deal with John's "big man syndrome" attitude:

> *I have pointed out that I'm just as smart if not smarter. I mean, I've pointed out that, you know, women are just the same as men... He would like I guess somewhat of a submissive wife every once in a while, but, on the other hand, he*

likes someone with a mind. So, he can't win both ways.... I'm going to say what I think when I have an opinion and I think that's the way it should be for everybody.

John also admitted that he can act like a "proud male" at times, but he does not seem to think that this defines their whole relationship.

Of course, being a proud male and everything like that, I will consistently stick my foot in my mouth and say stupid things. But, usually it doesn't escalate or anything like that. I may be trying to pick at or make her angry at what she's trying to say because I don't want to talk about it or I don't want to listen... I don't think that gender has made a big issue or anything like that. I don't see our relationship as boy beats chest, go hunt and you clean cave, kind of thing. No, what I meant about being a proud male is like, I think, girls are more in tune with their feelings and guys are more in tune with sports.

Cathy also talked about how Colin often uses male domination in his body language and how angry she feels because of it.

He tends to fold his arms and fist his hands and like, puff up, like he'll bulk his shoulders out and turn his elbows outward to give himself some more width when he's angry and we've had many a conversation about that's not an effective communication tool. He very much uses the non-verbal body language and it happens subconsciously because he doesn't notice that he's balling his fists and getting agitated when that happens. He doesn't notice that he "puffs up" and if you don't point it out to him the right way, then it leads to problems... I get pissed off because I know he's not supposed to be doing it and he's been told enough times that that's an act of aggression when you're in that sort of a situation. He's been told it by professionals, as well as by me.

Colin readily admitted displaying this type of male domination behaviour as well.

She makes no bones about telling me what my body language is. I tend to be fairly European when I talk. I use my hands and body a lot when I speak and she knows what all those things mean. There are times when I'm very intimidating in that way just because of my height. When I start pacing, I pace- something's up. I don't walk back and forth like that for no apparent reason- apparently! ... I gotta listen to her from time to time. More me than her, but, it's a male thing, you know. I mean that absolutely literally, I really do think that that's kind of a male trait. You know, I wanna be the alpha male and I'm gonna follow along and beat my chest until you hear what I have to say.

The women in this study appeared to all agree that men and women communicate differently. Sarah mentioned that she feels these differences are good because they bring people closer together and you learn more about yourself.

> *Men and women are very different and we communicate very differently and I guess it's a good thing because if we all communicated the same, well, what would be the point? There would be no, you know, no conflict, which I think can be good too to bring people closer together as well. You learn more about yourself.*

Cathy also made the following comments about gender differences in communication.

> *I think there's got to be a real understanding and acceptance that men and women are put together different and they think different and they feel different and they talk different and they have different needs when they're talking and sometimes you have to be able to be in touch with your feminine side when you're listening to your partner or she has to be in touch with her masculine side and understand that you know, this is what they're looking for.*

As well, Cathy and Sarah discussed their beliefs about women being able to talk longer than men. For instance, Cathy noted:

> *I don't think men can communicate for as long. Either women can yack for hours and men are like, "Ok, we're done." ... There's no sort of, "hey, how's it going?" kind of mean nothing and he kind of flip flops between being able to have a more extended conversation and "Get to the point, ok it's done, I don't want to talk about it anymore." And I think that's very much a gender thing... You need to have friends of your own sex that you can communicate with because they do understand each other inherently because they're the same, so men talking to men or women talking to women probably makes the biggest difference. Sometimes you don't think that you need anything more than your partner as your best friend, but you really do.*

Both Cathy and Rebecca also talked about how they want their partners to listen to them, rather than to try and necessarily "fix" the problem. For instance, Cathy made the following comments about this topic:

> *The men think there's nothing wrong with what they're doing because that's what you're asking for is for them to fix it, but you're not asking for them to fix it. Just*

> *listen. They're not supposed to even necessarily talk. And, women understand that and I don't think men understand it quite as much.*

Interestingly, Colin appeared to be aware that he tends to analyze situations and be an "advice-giver" in order to "fix" a problem for Cathy.

> *I guess from a standpoint my analytical nature has been a bit of a problem at times, just in that sometimes my sense of timing is not good. You know what I mean? I want to make things better and just give you a hug and tell you things are going to be ok and that's not at all what you want right now. You just wanted me to sit there and let you vent and rant and scream and do whatever it is you're going to do and just sit there and don't try to comfort you because that's not what you want right now. Recognizing that is sometimes difficult. When to shut up, when to be physical, when to... when you want advice, when you just want me to listen, because I'm the advice-giver. I'll analyze it and tell you what I think and tell you what I think you should do and you don't want to be told what I think you should do.*

Although the above participants made gender stereotypical comments about communication, one couple (Pete and Patricia) discussed how they have experienced a "role reversal" with typical gender behaviours. For example, Patricia had the following to say about how gender plays a role in her communication with Pete:

> *I think that gender does play a large part in how we communicate. I would say that he is waaaay, way, waaaaayyyy in touch with his feminine side and so putting that in context, it makes communicating a lot easier, because it's true and it's stereotypical, but it's true. Women are about their feelings and men are about fixing things and that's how they approach a problem. Women just wanna talk about it. They wanna find out how other people feel about that and they want some validation. Men want to fix the problem. He and I can talk for hours about how we feel about stuff. I sometimes want to fix his problems, when I know that they're not mine to fix. I can give, you know, my perspective on it or my advice, but it's not my problem. So, sometimes I think that I'm, I communicate more like a guy! [laughs]*

She then described Pete, as being an active listener, which she seems to believe, is more of a feminine quality.

> *Well, he's a, I mean communication is about listening too and he's the best listener in the world and active listening, like eye contact and open body and that*

> *comfort and so, I know that when I talk to him about things that I'm feeling, he actually is taking account what I'm saying, what he's seeing, the vibe I'm giving off, because he's actively listening.*

Pete seemed to have a similar view about the situation as Patricia. He had the following to say about gender communication:

> *From what I understand of gender communication, we're opposites. She's the person who when you're in a conversation wants to solve the problem and I'm the guy who just wants a listening ear. It's supposed to be the other way around right?*

Therefore, the above descriptions of how gender plays a role in communicating provides another example of how barriers exist in couple communication. Gender became a barrier in a number of ways, such as the male partner acting in an aggressive, dominating fashion, either verbally or non-verbally, as well as the frustrations that several of the women experienced based on their beliefs that men and women simply communicate in different ways. However, the gender "role reversal" that Pete and Patricia described reminds us not to assume that all couples interact in gender stereotypical ways.

Effective Communication

In exploring the experiences of communication among the participants, they identified those aspects of their communication that were successful or worked well for them in particular. These themes regarding effective communication are presented below.

Positive Communication Indicators.

The men in this study appeared to provide more detailed information regarding what contributed to their communication success. Both the men and the women; however, had some ideas about what would indicate to them that communication was going well or felt positive between them, such as how they feel or what would be happening between

them in a behavioural sense. Some of the participants chose to define "effective" or "positive" communication. For example, Jessica described some indicators of positive communication as an overall "comfortable" feeling:

> *Yeah, just that comfortable feeling. You're clicking, everything is going well. You're happy that everything is going nice and smooth or generally normal and you're just happy. You're just feeling good and making each other happy.*

John appears to pick up on Jessica's feelings of happiness and then reciprocates this feeling. He also seems to feel less stress when things are going well.

> *Obviously, I don't know if she relates to, like, if he's happy, then I'm happy. But, I certainly do. I think that if she's happy then I can be happy. ... Well, if everything is a streamline and everything is going well, then, there is obviously a lot less to be stressed about- one less thing to worry about. You know, everyone is happier.*

Patricia gave a brief definition of what communication means to her:

> *Communication, you know, at its most basic level is sharing information and wanting to share information and sharing information in a way that the other person can receive it.*

Patricia also provided the following comments about couple communication when she reviewed her interview summary and wanted to add/clarify some points about the interview:

> *Communication is used to present ideas and information in many different ways. Sometimes we share information to help someone make a decision, to teach them something, to make them think a different way, etc. One thing that is difficult in relationships is sharing thoughts and feelings just as information. ... In these situations, I always want to tell my partner how I'm feeling – not to lay blame, or make him feel like he needs to 'fix' the problem for me, but just as information, so he has an idea of how I'm being affected by what's happening around me. ... The first few times, it was really awkward for him, since it was so new, but now that he understands that I'm trying to let him into my personal space, he's better able to just accept what I'm saying as information only.*

Pete appears to have similar ideas about what makes communication positive:

> *Good or positive communication would involve both parties feeling like they're heard I think. So, um, that means you kinda have to learn to um, ask questions of understanding to make sure you get you know, sorta the feedback thing, like, "Am I hearing you say such-and-such?" Um, I don't know if this is exactly what you're getting at, but um, she and I often have to ask each other, "What do you need now?", as far as communication goes. "Do you need me to talk to you or just listen?" or, that kind of thing. So, it's important to kinda know what the other person is looking for.*

In providing clarification after the interview on his own personal definition of a close relationship, Pete had the following to say:

> *My own personal definition of a close relationship is one in which communication is open, both partners own their feelings and don't attack the other, both partners put the other person's needs before their own. For me personally, a close relationship will involve an intimacy that includes verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as spiritual intimacy expressed in an ability to "connect."*

Cathy had the following comments to make about what the communication is like between she and Colin when it is going well:

> *I think our communication works when we use non-extremes. I think if you're capable of, you can have disagreements, you have to be able to understand and to agree to disagree on different subjects. I think if you both have that type of personality that gets excited and finish the sentence for them. Then, if you know that that's what your partner's like, then don't hold it against them when they do it. It can't be ok sometimes and not ok other times. Listening better- not talking while you're supposed to be listening is probably one of the biggest that would help in any relationship I'm sure and actually using the clarifying sentences and the "I feel" sentences. It makes a big difference. And validating what your partner is saying.*

Colin appeared to be aware that he must avoid interrupting Cathy if he wants to communicate effectively with her.

> *Well, again, active listening is I think first and foremost for her. If I want to effectively communicate with her, I have to let her talk. I have to. It's something that, regardless of whether I think that I'm talking over top of her, or not, for a long time she said I didn't ever validate her, let her finish her thoughts and make her points, letting her do that, whether I think they're silly or not, goes a long way towards, like I said, instead of "smoothing the wrinkles out of the cloth" so to speak, the cloth of communication I guess is kind of the way I put it.*

Rebecca's ideas of what positive communication would include between she and Rob is the following:

> *Just, you know, lots of talking about what's happened over the day and discussion of goals and lots of joking around and, you know, obviously more intimacy and more respect. We're more careful about how we might say something or you know, just that whole "How would this person feel if I did this?" or, you know, just a, I guess a mutual respect that we don't always have when things aren't going well.*

Rob stated that the following would be indicators of positive couple communication:

> *Well, we're talking, communicating a lot more, a lot more affectionate. I don't know, I guess she sees me as being more involved with the family you know? ... If there was, if we actually got a result out of our disagreements that we both agreed on, you know, that would be good. That would tell me things are working. If we didn't have the silent treatment for a long period of time, that would be nice to get rid of. Those things would be good.*

Colin also spoke about how "picking his battles" has helped him to put problems into perspective. However, he also realizes that he still has work to do in this area. Colin also discussed his belief about how positive communication is a choice that we need to make.

> *Positive communication is much harder than negative communication. What I mean by positive communication is solving problems and conflict, like in a positive manner, as opposed to just getting angry. The easy thing to do is get angry and yell and you know communicate verbally or through body language in an angry or frustrated manner, as opposed to, you know, like I said, whereas in positive communication, when there's, it's much harder to say, come up with the good things... So, you sometimes have to kind of search for the good communication to happen I think.*

Consequently, even though these couples may have difficulty communicating- to the point of seeking out counselling to improve their relationships- they were also able to define what was working well for them in their communication practices. Sometimes they simply knew that they felt more positive or "less stressed" when they were

communicating better and other times, they were able to describe specific behaviours that led to positive communication (e.g., discussing goals, listening better, connecting on a spiritual level). At any rate, they seemed able to succinctly describe what communication errors they had made in the past and how to improve their communication. Some of the participants were quite honest in describing their tendencies to *choose* not to use the effective techniques, even though they knew what they *should* be doing to communicate well. Nonetheless, this level of awareness is promising, as they are at least noticing how their behaviours are impacting their partners and accepting responsibility for their actions.

Similar Beliefs/Personalities.

A theme that arose specifically among the women in this group of participants included the idea that they had similar beliefs and personality styles as their partners, as well as mutual respect for their roles in the family. They seemed to believe that these factors helped to make their communication more effective. For instance, Cathy had the following to say about the similar beliefs she and Colin have:

> *We have a lot of the same beliefs for a lot of things. So, we can go, um, you can use, I don't want to say non-verbal communication because it's the, no communication and your minds click. You can just do it without talking or looking or hand gestures or anything. It's just when you click, you really click- completely on the same page. And, even when it's verbal communication, we do have a lot of similarities and a lot of the same understandings of... the same beliefs, we both understand how the other one was raised and that sort of thing. So, it makes, we can click quite well that way. When we're talking about world beliefs, we have some very similar ones there and when we're on the similar ones, it clicks. We do have some very differing ones on other things too, but yeah, when it clicks, it really clicks.*

Jessica talked about how she and John are both giving people and how this similar personality characteristic makes communication easier for them.

> *We both are very giving type of people. Like, we really like to make people happy. It's in both of our nature. Like, we really strive for that. So, that part of our nature comes out with our communication which can be good because we like to be happy and we like to be having a good time and having fun and keeping the family happy and just generally feeling good about yourself and everybody around you. So, with that respect, those parts of our personality usually tend to help our communication there.*

In addition to similar beliefs, a few of the female participants discussed the importance of respecting each other's roles in the relationship. Sarah made the following comments in regards to this topic:

> *We just know that each other have a role, we respect the role, and when we can help with each other's roles, you know, because obviously I'm not gonna let him take my role, because that's in my role, right? And, it's hard for me to let him do the dishes. That's been a work in progress too because I'm used to doing everything myself. … Well, I think I've been a bit more laid back with letting him, I don't know if it's letting him, but just kinda me taking a step back as the natural parent, and letting him take more of an active role as the stepparent, you know? And just saying, "Ok, well let's see if they can figure it out without me stepping in."*

Jessica also talked about how John learned to respect her role more when he had to take time off work to take care of the kids for a week.

> *As well as, we did a role reversal recently, a little bit. Not on purpose. But, that kind of gave him a taste of my reality, I think. It was kind of a good way to do it. He had to fully take over the household and children for a week. I think that was good for him to understand what I go through on a daily basis. I think it was quite beneficial and just when he, after the first day, it was, he thought it was easy. After the second day, he figured it was not so easy and that was still with a little bit of help from me. Then he looked at it with a little bit of a different perspective… It's kind of just trying to communicate that and just realize that it's different. Everybody's role is just as important just because they are different.*

Therefore, the women in this study discussed how their similarities to their partners helped to make the communication process go smoother. They described how having similar life beliefs and mutual respect for each other's roles in the family helped them to understand each other better and made their lives "click" with one another. It

appears as though they are able to work together more collaboratively when they have similar ideas about how to parent the children and how to manage their households. It also seems as though they had to work at developing respect for one another, which sometimes occurred through situations that were outside of their control.

Feeling Safe to Communicate.

Another theme that arose for several of the participants in describing effective communication was feeling safe to communicate about anything and to challenge one another without jeopardizing the relationship. In other words, several of them felt that they could say what they wanted to without a fear of being offensive to the other person and without feeling as though their relationship was in jeopardy. Pete and Patricia, in particular, had many comments to make about how they felt safe to communicate and that this contributed to positive communication. John and Colin talked about how they felt open to talk about anything with their partners. John stated:

> *It's very open. I don't think there is anything I would feel uncomfortable talking to her about... what makes it work is having an openness to talk about anything. ...She's not only my wife, she's my best friend. If I can't tell my best friend, then who can you tell? I can talk to her about anything.... I think our relationship works, our communication works really well. She tells me what she wants or tells me what she needs to tell me. I reciprocate back to her.*

Patricia also seemed to feel safe in communicating with Pete because they both take responsibility for what they say.

> *I can say anything. As long as it's true and honest and real, I can say anything to him, regardless of whether it's even hurtful cause I'm not saying it intentionally to be hurtful. We use a lot of "I feel" statements. So, both of us accept full responsibility for feeling what we feel and as long as we're.... continue to say, you know, this is my perception, or this is how I feel about this, neither one of us seem to have an issue with whatever it is we say. You can say anything as long as you accept responsibility for it being yours instead of projecting it onto the other guy.*

Pete seemed to recognize that Patricia takes responsibility for her feelings. This approach appears to make him feel safe.

> *I give her a lot of credit. She has so much self-awareness to be able to say you know, I've been feeling this way for a long time and this is why and you know, this is where I am now kind of thing. Like, she knows what, she can identify what she's feeling or what she's experiencing and that always diffuses everything before it can even become explosive. You can't get into a fight with somebody who's right away saying, you know, this is what I'm experiencing. Not, this is what you're doing to me, but this is what I'm experiencing. She takes total responsibility for her own feelings and then invites me to help her sort it out because I might have something to do with it. You know? A totally different perspective than what I'm used to, which is "You dirty bastard!"... I don't know, you know, where she's learned it or whatever, life experience I guess, but it's the thing about her I love the most. It's so easy to work through stuff with her. It's safe. It's a safe place. It's home.*

Pete also talked about how they sometimes ask each other for some reassurance that the relationship is safe.

> *Yeah, like there's no worries. And, in fact, that was a thing when we get into these heavy conversations and then we'd stop and we go, "we're ok right?". "Oh yeah of course!"*

Several of these participants described how they felt open to talk about any topic and to say whatever they needed to without fear of reprisal or being shut down by their partners. Along with being able to speak freely was the idea that what they have to say is valued and respected by their partners, which seemed to make them feel more confident about expressing their opinions. It appears as though feeling safe to communicate also meant that they were able to "be themselves" without having to constantly monitor their words and their behaviour and that they gave each other room to make mistakes. As for Pete and Patricia, not only do they speak about one another in favourable terms, but they also seem to learn from one another as to what makes their communication more

effective. They also seem to have an underlying sense of confidence and security in their relationship, which seems to make their communication flow smoother.

Verification of the Message.

In discussing what makes the participants feel listened to and heard by their partners, a theme arose amongst all of the participants of getting some acknowledgement or verification that the message they sent was received appropriately. Some of the indicators that verification was achieved included paraphrasing, responding back, focusing on the person when they are talking, using body language to send and receive messages, and seeing your partner follow through on something you have previously asked him or her to do. For instance, Jessica made the following comments regarding how when John responds back to her and paraphrases what she is saying she feels as though he's listening to her:

> *Him responding back to me. Just, whether he's paraphrasing or just acknowledging what I said in some way or another is the biggest thing so that I know that he's actually heard what I've said... Just if he's nodding or with his body language. If he's not just watching T.V. instead. If he's actually looking at me and just being face to face and actually paying attention while I'm trying to say something rather than walking away or doing his own thing at the same time.*

Similarly, John also appeared to watch for body language to determine whether he and Jessica understand each other.

> *Just, like, a look saying "you need to stop talking before I get angry". Something like that. Maybe, a look, in a group of people, just like kind of a nervous look. Cause I find that I'm a lot more carefree and easy going in groups of people than she is. So, I can tell, many times, when we are with family, she can become uncomfortable and have a smileish look over her shoulder indicating "come here, come save me" kind of thing. So, I would say, typical bodily languages that I have to interpret all the time.*

Cathy also noticed that she and Colin use body language to achieve message verification, yet she recognized that they sometimes become self-focused.

> *I think we are capable of reading each other's body language quite well. I think sometimes we take it into consideration, sometimes we don't. It depends on how anxious you are to get your own message out. Then it tends to be, "I see what you're doing, I know this means this, but I don't care because I want to finish what I'm saying." Which isn't necessarily healthy because it doesn't get heard the way you want it to be heard anyways then.*

Along with body language, Cathy also stated that she and Colin use clarification and she admitted that she even goes so far as to clarify her own statements to avoid misinterpretations.

> *Not interrupting, not finishing sentences, clarifying usually helps so that you know that what you're saying is what they're hearing. I think sometimes I tend to try and clarify my own sentences if he doesn't clarify his own or ask for clarification. So, this is what you're saying. So, I'll go, "So what I'm actually saying is..."... and change what I'm saying to try and achieve the clarification that I'm looking for and acknowledging if I'm looking for results, seeing that result obviously then I know that it was heard and understood and...*

Pete also indicated that he relied on both body language and clarification to achieve verification of his message.

> *Yeah, body language, as well as just that checking up verbally, like, I suppose it's a way of saying, you know, "feed back to me what you've heard". We don't use that language, but what's it saying when we say, "Do you understand what I'm saying?" And the other person can sorta say, it's more that, we know that it's not just a yes or no question, that's, this is what I don't understand or yes, this is what I'm understanding you to say. Yes, you got it right and then we can move on or whatever. We just ask each other. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" "Does this make sense to you?" And usually we can tell by the person's look on their face. Like, I know with her, like, if I'm going on and on about something that's quite important to me and I'll look at her and I'll go, "Ok, I don't think I'm getting the idea across". Like, I can see the confusion or whatever, not understanding on her face. So, I'll go, "Do you get what I'm saying?" And that opens the door for her to go, "Well this is the part I don't understand". And then I can tell her, so yeah....*

For Jessica and Cathy, seeing some follow through on a previous issue that was talked about makes them feel listened to by their partners. For instance, Cathy mentioned the following:

> *I feel listened to if I see the results that I was looking for. Basically, it's pretty easy. If I see the results that I was looking for, then that tells me that what I said was heard, understood, and considered important enough to take action. Yeah, irregardless of whether it's a very, like if it's just a "You should stop doing this," I notice that it is stopped, or "Take a little more time to do this" or "Maybe once in awhile this could happen" and actually seeing it happen would probably make a difference.*

As such, it appears as though the participants in this study feel listened to when their partners respond back to them, paraphrase what they are saying, use body language to attend to them, and follow through behaviourally on what their partners have asked them to do. While some of the male participants recognized that it is difficult to maintain focus during long conversations or that being forgetful creates the perception that they are not listening, they still appeared to be making an effort in this area. Pete, in particular, described using both body language and clarification with Patricia and it appears as though they have a good understanding of these listening skills.

Connecting Through Body Language and Touch.

While the participants mentioned using body language to determine if their messages were getting across as intended, they all also discussed using body language and physical touch to communicate their feelings for one another, to determine if something was bothering their partners, or to feel connected to one another. For instance, Rob talked about being able to pick up on some of Rebecca's body language when she is upset.

> *Well, I can tell when there's something bothering her. Like, if she's thinking of something or she's upset about something, I can usually tell. That, yeah. She's pretty quiet and she usually won't pay attention to me if she's upset about*

> *something. You know, not necessarily upset at me, but with one of the kids and something upset her. I can usually tell when that's happening.*

Pete and Patricia gave some very subtle examples of each other's body language and they seemed to feel confident about attributing a meaning to that body language. For instance, Pete described Patricia's body language in the following way:

> *I would say yeah, it's gotten to the point where I can actually tell the difference between I'm turning my back to you because I need to sleep on this side tonight and I'm turning my back to you because I'm pissed off at you. And, I'm not even sure what that's...like break down the physical components of it, you know, it's more of a vibe in the room or whatever. But, for example, I know, I can tell how she is just by listening to her walk around the room while I, I get up a half hour later than she does and when she's really bustling and kind of loud I know she's not having a good morning and her body language is almost saying, "You know, you lay there and sleep you friggin lazy ass while I have to go and take care of all this stuff!" She talks with her feet! Stomp Stomp!! And, I just kinda grin and go, "You know, it's not my issue!"*

Colin also gave some very specific examples of body language indicators that would suggest that Cathy is uptight, annoyed, or stressed.

> *Generally speaking, I still think I've got a pretty good handle on you know, how, what I can say, what I can't say, you know, when she's starting to get uptight, annoyed, I can hear it in voice inflections, I can see it in the body language. I'm pretty good at that, you know. As far as reading the non-verbal signals. I tend to ignore them at times, but I see them. When she's annoyed with me and I walk through the door, there are points in time when she happens to be laying on the couch later on in the evening, she'll just turn over and face the wall or face the back of the couch and that's a pretty good indication to me that quite possibly something's wrong. The pursed lips, this [rubbing forehead]...that's an indicator for me... Yeah. And, when she starts playing with her hair. As soon as she starts playing with her hair like this [motions], something's up. Whether it has to do with me or anything else, there's some stress going on.*

John talked about noticing Jessica's body language to determine how she is feeling and to determine whether he needs to be more supportive.

> *And, I guess, after a while, because you have done it long enough, it becomes second nature. Like, understanding, even from the tone of voice, even very subtlely, how important the information is. I don't have to, like, if she's not feeling*

> *well, or she's upset about something, and she's talking, I can pick up that tone in her voice and her body action. I can figure out if something is wrong that we have to work on or be supportive to her.*

Some of the participants also discussed how the use of physical touch can be used in communication. For instance, Colin stated the following:

> *Lately, we've been using touch. You know, the touching, "touchy-feely" kind of communication, like that. Where we didn't for a long time because of the stress in both of our lives that's been going on for quite some time. It sort of tends to make you want to not let people invade your personal space. I try to use it as much as I can* anyways. *You know? As they say, "A picture is worth a thousand words." So, to me, that kind of works the same way. I would have to say it would show. You know, body language, that type of thing. So, yes, as the communication has gotten better, that becomes easier and more natural and anyway it's a good, I think it's a good tool- one of the best ones that we have.*

In Pete's case, the use of physical touch and having sex is when he feels an intense connection.

> *Uh, a lot of looking at each other and it's always good. I mean there's no, you know, those flashes or giving somebody the evil eye. That doesn't happen. Touching. We touch a lot. We have a great sex life. There's a lot of communication that happens there. You know, in terms of, yeah, it's real communication, it's not just sex. That's when the communication is most intense for us. So, that's awesome. Yeah...*

Sarah commented on how physical touch plays a role in her communication, because she has had to learn how to increase her level of affection towards Sam.

> *Well, again I keep directing it to the conflict, but he's more of an affectionate person and I have to learn to be affectionate, like the "huggy-cuddly" person, which I've never really been and so that, cause that's how he communicates how he feels, like his positive feelings. He likes to hug when he comes home and when he comes home, I'm like, "The kids are killing me and everything and I'm making dinner!" You know, I'm not really in that state where I'm wanting to be affectionate, so I've had to learn to be more "huggy" I guess, if that makes sense. Cause that's a way you can communicate right?*

As well, Rebecca has noticed that how she greets Rob when he comes home can "set the mood" for the evening, whether she intended to do this or not.

> *I guess the example I can think of is him coming home from work and I know that I can set the mood immediately if I don't walk over to him and greet him and so he's, he comes into the house very differently if I don't do that, like he'll be annoyed, you know, less patience with the kids and just less patience in general if I don't, you know, go over and greet him. You know, give him a kiss and ask him about how his day was kind of thing. It's almost like I feel like I have that control- not that I want it, but it is definitely something I've noticed.*

Therefore, it appears as though these couples use body language for different purposes. In the previous theme, they used body language to verify a message or to determine if their partners were listening to them. In this theme, they discussed how they used body language for connection purposes. For example, they would pay attention to each other's body language to determine if their partners were upset or stressed out about something or they would use physical touch to let each other know that they care about one another. In some cases, the participants discussed having to use more physical touch and affection than they would typically use, because they know that is what their partner needed at the time. At any rate, body language and touch appeared to be an important part of the couples' communication practices.

Self-Awareness and Partner Empathy.

The most common theme amongst both the men and the women in the effective communication category was having self-awareness about one's communication style, coupled with empathy for one's partner and his or her communication style. This was the most common theme because the highest number and most extensive of responses were given in this area when discussing the topic of communication in the interviews. What appeared to help make communication more effective was when the participants used the knowledge they had about themselves or their partners to improve their couple communication. The sub-themes within this theme included having self-awareness about

their own communication styles, accepting each other for whom they are and adapting their style to meet their partner's needs, having empathy for their partner's communication style, being attuned to each other's needs in communication, communicating in a way that is meaningful to one's partner, and paying attention to timing and mood in communication.

In the first sub-theme, all of the participants discussed having self-awareness about their communication styles. For instance, Colin discussed how a lack of self-awareness has been the "biggest stumbling block" to effective communication for he and Cathy.

> *Well, I think mostly that awareness, or I should say a lack of self-awareness is the biggest stumbling block for us to effective and clear communication because, for me, I don't even realize most of the time that I interrupt and talk over top of people and do things like that and I don't even realize I'm doing it. It just comes out of my mouth sort of like "verbal diarrhea."*

However, he has been learning about his communication style and how he comes across, particularly in how he expresses his emotions and the process of letting go of old issues.

> *Not only, you know, saying a, but meaning b and/or saying what you mean and meaning what you say, but learning to say it, as opposed to keeping it bottled up or however you want to put it and again, when effectively communicating, I think to me is not doing that, absolutely not doing that. I always have kind of worn my emotions right out in the open and when you ask me to bottle it up inside, it just doesn't work... As far as communication goes, it's not, you know, "If you've got something to say, say it", but also know to let it go when you're done so that we don't drag it up again and again and again and again.*

Pete demonstrated some self-awareness about his own communication style and how Patricia inspires him to improve the way he communicates.

> *You know, the thing that I've realized I think is that all my life until recently I've had a bit of a temper that often comes out verbally- lashing out, cutting statements. Not name calling, it's gotta be intelligent and witty, you know, so the person feels really stupid! And I never get to that place where I even feel like I*

> *need to do that with her because our conversation is so calm and peaceful and there's always this sort of an approach that we want to solve a problem, not hurt a person and that's different and new for me and it's not anything that I know of that I'm doing intentionally- except that the process when it's healthy already makes you want to do better even more. So, you know, I'm aware of it and I kinda go, "That's cool, let's keep it up." But, it's not like I sit down and go ok, I'm going to be very careful in what I say here.*

Sarah also seemed aware that her communication style led to her attempting to prolong a conversation in order to reduce her own level of anxiety. By sharing this insight with Sam, he was able to reassure her when a similar situation arose.

> *So, he would try and stop talking to me right, and it's me going, no, I need to keep him talking to me. I need to say something to get him to keep talking cause if he stops talking, then I'm sitting here with my own thoughts and then I'm just, it's just going to build inside me...And I might jump to conclusions and start assuming the worst. When I told him that this is what I did when he left in the middle of a conversation, he made a point of reassuring me the next time that we would continue talking later and that everything was ok even though we were in an argument. This helped me big time because, you know, I was less apt to jump to conclusions and make a huge issue of it in my mind.*

Rob, on the other hand, had an idea that his approach was not working, but he did not seem sure how to alter his approach.

> *I don't know how to approach her. It's, I'm pretty straightforward, but that doesn't always go over too well. You know, I don't "candy coat" things. I try and say it the way I feel, but I know she doesn't like that because she gets offended.*

In the second sub-theme, the whole group of participants talked about accepting each other for whom they are and adapting their styles to meet their partners' needs. For instance, Pete acknowledged that just because something makes *him* uncomfortable, does not mean that Patricia needs to change.

> *I'm acknowledging that I feel uncomfortable with it, but that doesn't mean I need it to change. That's just who she is.*

Patricia also advocated for gaining self-awareness in order to figure out how to communicate your needs to your partner and change your style to get your message across more clearly.

> *The problem is that we just hadn't communicated to ourselves what was important and what we were going to, how we were going to go about it and so, there was no way we were ever going to be able to communicate our needs to the other person and of course it's not going to work. If nobody knows what they want how are they going to put that into words or actions? So, but I think that's the self-awareness thing, and that's a personal trait or something that you need to be able to do and look at yourself and say, ok what, what am I doing right? What am I doing wrong? What can I change? How can I be more effective?*

John believed that he was not only able to meet Jessica's needs, but also to anticipate them in advance.

> *I think a lot of times that we perceive a lot of each other's thoughts and stuff like that. She's very caring and sensitive and I try to be someone that's a little bit more nurturing to her needs and responsive to her needs and what she's saying. I try to, I don't know, I guess it's hard to describe. I try to think of what she wants before she actually says it. I try to be one step, a little bit more about one step ahead. You know, just to show that maybe, it's not so much as of being supportive, obviously that's the aim, but, you know, more caring and towards her feelings and her needs.*

In the third sub-theme, some of the participants discussed having partner empathy and understanding an issue from your partner's point of view. For instance, Colin had the following to say about respecting Cathy's viewpoint:

> *Beyond that, letting her have her way. Not pushing my way on her all the time, which is something that I tend to do at times. There are 2 ways to do it: The wrong way, and my way. The good thing is I will fully and readily admit if I'm wrong. I'll say I'm wrong. And I didn't always used to be like that, but I'm man enough to be able to stand up and say this at this point. And I use that term loosely, because it doesn't take a "man"- women are just as equally able to do that. From a macho, male sexist point of view, it makes me more of a man!*

Patricia had a similar comment to make about "not pushing an agenda" on the other person.

> *We are able to communicate well because we want to. I truly want to understand him and he truly wants to understand me. It's not about pushing our own agendas, it's about understanding the other person. When you've been misunderstood that long and you make that connection, the only way anybody's ever gonna understand you is if you try and understand them first and it really means putting the other person first all the time.*

Pete talked about feeling respected by Patricia because she was able to separate his behaviour from who he was as a person.

> *Very early on she demonstrated to me personally that she could be angry with me and keep her arm around my shoulder at the same time. That was the image that came to my mind. In fact, we had kind of a significant argument a couple months into our relationship that terrified me because my previous relationship was so incredibly conflictual that all the red flags started coming up. And we were sitting in a restaurant and I just marveled at the way she could tell me she wasn't happy with the way, with whatever the issue was, I don't remember what it was, and my role in it, but I never got the sense that that meant she felt any less of me as a person and that's what respect means, is that you can separate the person from the issue or the person from their behaviour or whatever, even if it is stupid behaviour. To say, you know that's not like you and that hurt me and instead of saying, you always treat me like this right?*

In the fourth sub-theme, two of the participants discussed being attuned to each other's communication. For instance, Patricia talked about how she and Pete can sense what each other are going to say.

> *It's like he's sensing something is coming from me and he's understanding it, whatever it is, whether it's just an aura or electrical impulses- whatever it is, if I'm feeling it, he can feel it in me, coming from me and the same. Cause we'll both sit there, you know, cause we're just goofy and we're doing the "googly eyes" at each other and both of us we'll go and we'll say something and then we'll start laughing because we don't need to say it. My words are already in his mouth.*

Sarah also discussed what it is like for she and Sam to be able to understand each other effortlessly.

> *For the most part, we get it and I think just with knowing each other better it helps too because you know what they mean without them having to actually communicate it with you... I guess you get to that point with each other where you*

just know and it's non-verbal and you understand what he's going to do and he knows what you're going to do and you do it.

In the fifth sub-theme, some of the participants discussed the notion of communicating in a way that made sense to the other partner (i.e., taking the other partner's communication style into consideration). For example, Sarah talked about how she changed her communication style to fit Sam's without even really realizing that she was doing it.

I guess it was last week or something. We had probably had the conversation before, but it for some reason, I was explaining myself differently and he got it. ...it just was like one of those, I think it was because I felt like, it's not like I hold back, but maybe I do and I don't realize that I hold back when I'm trying to communicate and I'm, it's not like I'm speaking in a different language or something, but it may seem that way to him, but it's more like a, I don't know, I just seem to use words in a way that made sense to him and it just clicked and we were able to resolve it and it was something that we do every time we argue.... So, and he's like, it kinda makes sense why you do that now and I don't think we've argued since then.

Sam also mentioned that it has taken them a great deal of "trial and error" to get to the point of understanding each other well.

I don't know how much trial and error we've gone through to actually get through to each other. For awhile there, I wondered if we were even- not talking the same language, but we saw things totally differently, you know? I think we now know how to, like, talk to each other in a way that makes sense cause we approach problems so differently and you kinda have to step into the other person's shoes if you wanna get a point across to them.

Patricia also had an insightful comment to make about the importance of communicating in a way that is meaningful for the receiver.

You have to present stuff to the other person in a way that's meaningful for them, not meaningful for you. And in my own experience, we don't use it in terms of communication, sometimes it's a difficult thing. It's, "I want to show you how I feel about you, about what's happening. So, I'm gonna show you in a way that's meaningful for you, not what I want, but what you want, because if I truly want the message to get to you, I have to put it in a language that you understand." ...

> *And, unfortunately the human brain is more complex than that. We have sometimes a really hard time understanding things on a very basic, simple level. We need a little bit of confusion and complexity to challenge us so it has to be about the other person. You have to communicate in their style, not yours.*

In the last sub-theme, all of the participants discussed being cognizant of the appropriate time to have a conversation and how the moods of both partners could impact communication. Rebecca talked briefly about how timing is important in order to have a good conversation.

> *I think that timing and location make communication work for us and alone, like we communicate better alone than with kids around or friends around. So, finding a time of day that works and a space where we have some alone time or quiet time to talk. Yeah, like talking about something serious when, you know, I'm in the kitchen and he's over there, it just doesn't work.*

Pete mentioned that both he and Patricia are not very effective at communicating late at night, so they tend to agree to discuss things in the morning if it is an important issue.

> *The best time for us to talk depends on what's going on because you know, we're in a family, so it has to be times when we can be alone and I mean, usually we solve our issues when they come up, but if there's a big one, like we both know that talking about it at night before bed is not good because neither one of us is an evening person. And, nobody's upset that we're not... I think because we have enough confidence in our relationship that it's gonna weather the night [laughs].... So, we have learned not to go into issues at night.*

John discussed how he has learned about how timing and mood has an impact on their ability to communicate as a couple. He indicated that he has explained to Jessica that he believes there are certain times to talk about certain issues and that she understands his point of view.

> *Communication changes depending on the mood. It depends on the time of day, what we are doing, what I'm thinking about, how much time I had to do this and that, how much am I juggling all at once depends on my communication. I try now to tell her that it's not the right time to talk about this right now because I just can't concentrate on it, or give you my one hundred percent opinion or my full attention to this issue at this moment.... But, I find, I think, when we talk, more or*

> *less, during the evening, it's not so much about little social matters of the heart. It's more of the key issues like dealing with children and daily duties, stuff like that. Especially when I just get home after work, that's when our business conversations are going on. That's when she wants to do them. Whereas, I think after me coming home from work, it should be a little more social. So, we differ a little bit there but we usually get around it. So, if I have to tell her that it isn't sticking in my brain, this isn't the right time, then, that's not a problem with her.*

John also attributed some of their conflicts to "daily frustrations" and low energy and he appears to put these into perspective.

> *Obviously, she thinks, she mentioned to me that these are some things that we just haven't made progress with. But, obviously, this actually has been a time where we have been grumpy with each other or frustrated or just that daily frustration thing that can happen. But, she has also said that she didn't really mean that. She was just venting. I'm tired. I'm worn out. Whatever. Life's little valleys. But, it's nothing major.*

Rebecca talked about paying attention to whether Rob has had enough rest or whether they have enough time to fully discuss an issue.

> *I guess I've learned that there's certain things that I wouldn't talk about if he's not in the right mood. So, sort of watch for whether he's had enough rest or whether he's had anything to drink or whether we just have time period to start talking about something. Like, you know, it's probably not appropriate on the way to somewhere for somebody's you know, family for dinner kind of thing. I wouldn't start bringing up a major issue. I'd wait until we're, you know, by ourselves, and more calm, because otherwise, you know, something that he may have no problem with usually, like if he's not in the right mood, then it would be a problem.*

Patricia also noted that she and Pete are often quite blunt with one another about whether it is an appropriate time to have a conversation.

> *But, we're both just true genuine people. What you see is what you get. And, so, we don't beat around the bush, you know? If I'm tired I can come home and say, "You know what? I had the day from hell. I'm tired. Don't talk to me!" And the first thing he'll say is, "Oh, well can I make dinner? Why don't you let me make the dinner?" And so it's that- ok, you're honest with me, you're tired, you're burnt out, what can I do to give you some relax time so that you can get better, feel better, get past it, and we can enjoy an evening together.*

To conclude this theme, the majority of the responses as to what makes communication effective were in the area of self-awareness of one's communication style and having empathy for your partner's style. Also included in this theme were the ideas of being attuned to each other's needs in communication, adapting their styles to meet their partner's needs, communicating in a way that is meaningful to one's partner, and paying attention to timing and mood in communication. It is possible that since most of these participants are in second marriages, they may have a higher self-awareness and more realistic expectations about their partners and relationships in general. On the other hand, their participation in counselling may have increased their awareness levels and provided them with empathy skills. Nevertheless, this group of couples appears to feel that the above issues are of key importance in making communication work between them.

Attachment

The next category of inquiry was to explore how the partners in distressed couples experienced attachment/intimacy in their relationships. In discussing this topic, rather than using the term "attachment," the participants were invited to define what intimacy or closeness in an intimate relationship meant to them. Interestingly, communication was included by some of the participants as being an important component of intimacy. Within this category, the participants discussed issues such as what made them feel closer to or more distant from one another, their beliefs about intimacy in relationships, how gender issues affected intimacy, how their childhood experiences and previous romantic attachments affected their ability to be intimate in their current relationships, and their views of trusting their partners or others. The themes that arose in the area of attachment/closeness/intimacy for the couples and how these issues affected their

communication will be presented below. Please see Table 2 for a summary of themes within this category.

Table 2

Summary of Attachment Themes

Attachment
Defining Intimacy
Barriers to Closeness/Intimacy
Behaviours that Encourage Closeness and Connection
Beliefs About Intimacy
Gender Issues with Intimacy
Previous Romantic Attachments
Childhood Experiences
Trusting Partner vs. Trusting Others

Defining Intimacy.

Some of the participants chose to define what intimacy, or what a close relationship, meant to them personally. Cathy first joked about Harlequin romance novels being a guide to what a relationship should be like and she then gave the following comments regarding accepting each other's differences and not expecting "perfection:"

> *I think understanding and acceptance and not only acceptance of the things you have in common, but acceptance of the things you have that are different... And being on the same page when you need to be on the same page or the majority of the time, but knowing that there's also gonna be times when you're not having that be ok. I don't think there's any such thing as a perfect, never have a*

> *disagreement relationship and from everything I've learned, you shouldn't because that's false.*

On the other hand, Rebecca described a close relationship as the following:

> *A close relationship to me is being able to say anything or tell your partner anything and not be fearful of them ridiculing you, you know, or being able to act the way that, well, being able to act like yourself and not worrying about how you might appear and just being there for you. If you're having a lousy day, you can just phone them and say... "Can you come home?" and he does, he always does. He's very good that way, very, it might not be important to him or it might not be important at all in the big scheme of things, but he makes it important. So, that makes me feel, like he's close to me.*

Interestingly, Rob had a similar idea of what entails a close relationship.

> *You can talk about anything, you know, any problems or anything you're thinking about. If you're asked something, you shouldn't have to lie about what you're feeling or whatever. You should be able to tell them what you're feeling and all that.*

Sarah instead placed an emphasis on honesty when defining a close and connected relationship.

> *Well, I think it definitely has to be an honest one [relationship]. I mean, people are usually honest, but to make it more honest and bring it a little bit further... I think allowing yourself to step outside of that safety zone with communicating and with affection and all these other things that are so natural* not *to want to share and not to just instantly be like, you know, ok, well he's not accepting me for me, but he doesn't really know who I am because I'm not letting him know that, so, you know, I think that's definitely a big thing. And, obviously communicating. I know* I've *really changed at communicating. I* communicate. *Like, before I just, I don't even know what you'd call it.... I think communicating honestly your feelings and the right person really make a relationship work a lot.*

Thus, some of the participants defined intimacy in their own words and they included such ideas as accepting one another, being open to say anything to your partner, having your partner respond to your needs in a timely manner, being honest with both yourself and your partner, and putting in the necessary effort required to make a

relationship work. In the "Beliefs About Intimacy" theme, more ideas will be presented regarding how such definitions play out in the couples' relationships.

Barriers to Closeness/Intimacy.

Each participant in this study had some clear ideas about those factors that interfered with developing intimacy or feelings of closeness. The sub-themes in this section included arguing, not having their needs met, not picking up on the cues that your partner wants to be intimate, personal feelings and issues that interfered with intimacy, and drifting apart in the relationship. The women in this study identified more concerns or barriers to intimacy than the men identified.

In the first sub-theme, some of the participants indicated that fighting/arguing made them feel less close to their partners. Jessica and Rebecca both mentioned fighting and not having had sex in awhile as factors that interfered with intimacy. For instance, Rebecca stated:

> *Well, if we haven't I guess had sex for awhile, definitely, I don't feel as close and that seems to be, you know, one of the big things, that does make me feel close to him. And, you know, getting along of course. I don't feel very close to him when we're fighting. It's almost one extreme to the next. You know? Oh, I'd like to leave. You know? That kind of a feeling.*

For both Cathy and Rebecca, they reported having difficulty being affectionate and/or sexual with their partners when they are arguing. For instance, Cathy talked about how she feels like she is in a "no-win situation" with Colin if she does try and give him affection when they are arguing because it does not meet his needs, yet it also creates problems if she does not give him any affection at all.

> *He tends to say that I, what is it? Kiss him like I'm kissing my brother or like his mother just gave him a peck or something like that, something along that line and that's, again, everybody needing different things, because I would be just as*

> *happy having no intimacy period when we're arguing- no kissing, no hugging, no touching, no whatever, whereas he's going "I want that." So, he's getting what he wants, but it's not what he wants, because he's not satisfied with what he's getting because it's not the level of intimacy he wants anyways.... So, it's a no-win situation when it's like that, because I prefer to be doing nothing, so you're getting about what I'm capable of giving right now.*

In the second sub-theme, some of the participants discussed not having their needs met as being a barrier to closeness/intimacy. For example, Cathy mentioned that she is dissatisfied with the amount of sex she is having in her relationship. She indicated that Colin expressed to her that poor communication has led to his lack of desire.

> *There's a complete lack of sexual intimacy, so... There's two different things at play there, because that aspect of the relationship is non-existent and has been for a long time. So, it's hard to say how our communication could impact our sex life. Um, it used to be a problem. If there was a fight, there wasn't going to be anything else either. Now, there just isn't anything else period. So, the lack of sex has impacted the way I feel everything is going is probably more accurate. At least I think they go hand in hand.*

Jessica, on the other hand, admitted to a lack of physical attraction being a barrier for her in the area of sexual intimacy.

> *I think we just have, we're kind of on different, almost, kind of on different thoughts on our physical attraction levels too; which come into play a little bit too. So, it's kind of all those issues that come into play...with physical intimacy because when I met him initially, well, he was less weight then and that was a little easier, but, weight, I have a hard time with. And, as he's gone up a little bit, it's harder for me to get over in just the physical way. So, from that, it can be somewhat of a barrier where it's harder cause it's, you know, you don't want to hurt the other person's feelings either.*

Sam also mentioned how he has difficulty in asking Sarah for emotional support and affection when he needs it; and hence, he does not get his needs met unless he is clearer in asking for something.

> *I don't, I usually won't ask her directly if I need something from her or if I want a hug or whatever. You know? I won't say that I feel down or whatever. Usually I'll try and send out signals you know, that mean I feel a little depressed or whatever,*

> *you know. Maybe she'll pay a little attention to me or whatever. I usually won't communicate it verbally unless I feel I'm being, she's not getting the hint. We usually will get to the point where I'll get mad and you know, I'm not having a good day, type of thing, or I'm feeling stressed or whatever, usually I have to spell it out.*

In the third sub-theme, two of the male participants (John and Rob) admitted to "not picking up on hints" when their partners wanted to be closer to them. For example, John mentioned the following:

> *I might, if she's trying to send a signal to me, I'm pretty much receptive to the intimacy thing. It's everything else that would make me want to push her away.... Although, I have been blamed for not picking up on subtle hints and stuff like that, that I probably should have if I was in my right mind or something like that. I've been accused of that by not picking up on vibrations. I told her to not send love notes to me. Just get in the truck and drive.*

Rob had a similar experience:

> *I might miss a few times when she maybe wants to be a little closer and I'm just, I miss it totally! [laughs] Not often, but she has mentioned it to me after. I didn't even catch on, you know?*

In the fourth sub-theme, several of the participants expressed having difficulty connecting to their partners and feeling an urge to distance themselves when they were dealing with some personal feelings and/or issues. For example, Pete admitted to talking to Patricia less when he feels like isolating himself.

> *Um, the more distant I am, the less I want to talk, for sure, which always leaves her open to, or her questioning her ability to interpret my silence or the short few words that I am saying. Yeah, the amount that I'll talk in a conversation will be less. And, when I say I'm not feeling close to her it's cause I'm feeling inside of myself. And, so I'm going deep in here and she's kind of out there and I've just, I don't know what to say at this point, so I just don't talk.... So that would be my pattern.*

Sarah described how her moods and needs impact how close she wants to be with Sam on a daily basis. She also talked about how Sam can sometimes take her need for space personally, as though it is a conscious choice to push him away.

> *It's just a natural thing for me to go push, push, push and you know, I just need some space and sometimes I'll just say, you know, give him the hug and give him the kiss and just like you know, "I really need my space." And, he usually respects that. Sometimes he takes it personal, because he thinks it's because I don't want to be close to him and in fact, it's just me not wanting to be close with anybody at that point in time.*

However, she discussed how she is attempting to move past that intimacy barrier.

> *Well, I kind of you know, for a really, really long time, probably the most in my life, my whole life I kinda kept people at a distance and so, I've had a lot of space because I've given myself- taken that space, right? But, I just know that sometimes when he wants to be close and cuddly and affectionate, I just, my skin wants to crawl, because I just feel like, "Oh my God! I can't breathe!" And, so now that I'm trying this new thing, letting someone in this close and then he's an affectionate, not in my face, but sometimes it kinda feels like a little claustrophobic, and I just, I need to kind of, I guess I can feel a little bit claustrophobic. But, now I am trying to change that pattern and that would be him [partner].*

For Jessica, she talked about sometimes not wanting to be affectionate with John because she is distracted with a task. However, John seems to take this as rejection, whereas Jessica is only telling him to put the affection on hold for the moment. Jessica also discussed how physical distance could lead to feeling emotional distance as well.

> *It just doesn't feel the same cause you're not communicating. We don't spend as much time together. Don't necessarily sleep in the same bed all the time. When he's got a lot going on at work and stuff or whatever, he'll end up staying up late watching a movie. So, I'll sleep on the couch and then that'll affect how we feel, like, closeness wise cause we're not sleeping in the same bed and stuff.... If there's not that physical contact and communication, then it creates a distance.*

For Colin, being treated like a child makes him want to distance himself from Cathy.

He also mentioned that he has become aware of his triggers for anger and stress and he informs Cathy when it is not an appropriate time to attempt to get close to him.

> *I've also taken to trying to be very clear about if we're feeling close and there's touchy-feely....if I'm not, if I've had a bad day and I have issues with depression and I have mood fluctuations at times and it's much better lately, much better. And again, it has to do with stress. But, I'm very clear in the communication that I'm not feeling right. It's probably a better idea if you don't push me on stuff today, you know? Just because I'm not feeling it and it's self-awareness... it doesn't matter what the other person says or does...I'm not in the mood to be close.... And, I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing. There's absolutely no point in trying to make something out of nothing when 24 hours down the road you can make something out of something.*

Pete also mentioned about how stress sometimes creates an intimacy barrier for he and Patricia because they both have a tendency to "crawl inside themselves" to work through an issue.

> *I think it has to do with when we crawl inside, like if I crawl inside myself because I'm really struggling with something, it's not a deliberate attempt to shut her out, it's just an attempt to cope with stress... and so often we'll notice the coming back together more than we'll notice that we've been apart emotionally. And, we'll be like, "Wow, we haven't connected in awhile." It's not that we haven't been around each other, but it's that, we've just been maybe too busy or yeah, we've been so stressed out that we just haven't had the emotional energy to let the other person in.*

In the fifth sub-theme, Both Cathy and Rebecca discussed feeling as though they were drifting apart from their partners and quite often questioned the future of their relationships. For instance, Cathy stated the following:

> *I think we're going through a stage of drifting, um, farther apart than closer together. Um, it's sort of a rebuilding [starts to cry]. And deciding what you actually want. Ok, what I want... It's a matter of having had enough and deciding if I want more or more of the same.*

Cathy then mentioned that Colin is not aware of where she's at with the relationship, as she is processing it internally at this point and has not yet expressed her thoughts and feelings to him.

> *He doesn't know that that's where I completely am either, so...and I think it's something that I need to deal with internally. I don't think it's something that, because it's only a decision that only I can make, so...But, it's a decision that I have to make for the right reasons, sort of a thing. I think it's probably where we are. I think we need to re-build as friends and then see from there, because there's been a lot of forgetting how to be friends. I think I would need to see some better progress especially with the intimacy issue or else I will just become tired of trying without seeing any improvement.*

In Rebecca's case, she indicated that she often views her arguments with Rob as being more extreme and she will often jump to wondering whether she should end the relationship. However, Rob seems to view it in a more realistic fashion.

> *Um, I think when we're mad at each other, that my feelings are more extreme than his, like I think he, sort of sees the light at the end of the tunnel, whereas I don't. Like, I'm mad and I'm mad and that's all there is to it. Like, he doesn't....I don't feel like um, I don't even feel like I'm in a marriage to tell you the truth. It's just, I'm just angry and I can't see a resolution. I'm ready to end the whole thing! Whereas, I think he's a little more realistic that way. He knows it will blow over.*

She then talked about how they move on from that point. However, she often feels unstable in the relationship.

> *I guess it's just, you know, things look better when you've had enough rest. I don't know honestly! By the weekend, like I said, we usually seem to have the time to fix, well not fix, but you know, talk about what might have happened and you know, apologize, kind of thing. So, it does feel, you know, it often feels unstable for me. It's like way up or way down.*

Two of the couples (Rob and Rebecca and Colin and Cathy) discussed their tendencies to "live separate lives" when they are not feeling close, which only increases the distance between them. Rob mentioned the following:

> *Well, there's less talking if we're not feeling close. We don't get to "shoot the breeze" or anything. We just kinda go about our own thing and live our own lives.*

Cathy also discussed "living a separate life" and having very little communication with Colin when she's not feeling very close to him.

> *If I'm not feeling close, I probably don't even want to look at him. I won't have a conversation. I'm not interested or if I'm not feeling particularly close, then I pretty much live my life as a single person. I don't tell him where I'm going. I don't tell him what I'm doing. I just say, "I'm gone. I'll be back later." That sort of thing and I don't lead a very open life if I'm not feeling particularly close. You just happen to reside in the same house is about what it is.*

Hence, it would appear that the couples in this study have experienced a number of barriers to intimacy, such as dealing with personal issues or feelings and drifting apart from one another in their relationships. One couple appeared to be able to express to one another that they needed some space and distance (i.e., Cathy and Colin), whereas another couple (i.e., Rob and Rebecca) appeared to simply wait for the distancing period to end without discussing what was happening. It also appears as though external factors such as stress and leading busy lives impacts how close these couples feel towards one another. From their descriptions, it seems as though the physical and emotional aspects of their relationships are closely tied because when one partner is going through an emotional issue, he or she usually described needing some physical space. Similarly, when the emotional closeness was lacking in some of the couples' relationships, they discussed having difficulty feeling physically close during these time periods. On a positive note, the periods of distancing described by the couples did not appear to extend over a long time and they seem to have a desire to improve their levels of closeness with their partners.

Behaviours that Encourage Closeness and Connection.

All of the participants also knew what made them feel closer or more attached to their partners. They were able to identify specific behaviours that promoted closeness and connection. The sub-themes that arose within this theme were being more open and sharing more with each other, being attuned to each other's needs, challenging each other and balancing one another out, "re-experiencing" love (arose amongst the women only), and awareness of mood and environment when connecting (arose amongst the men only).

The first sub-theme included most of the participants stating that not only do they talk more when they're feeling close to one another, but they are also more open with their communication. For instance, Pete stated the following:

> *When we're feeling close, we just talk about whatever for longer periods of time. We don't censor ourselves and we say whatever is on our minds.*

Cathy discussed being more open with Colin by doing more together as a couple when they are feeling closer to one another. Rob also seemed to equate being closer with talking and sharing problems, as well as helping each other out with daily tasks.

> *Like I said, it's whether she's communicating with me or not. If she's talking to me and telling me her problems or what's going on, I feel closer. I feel like I can contribute. I like that. Um, you know, when she asks me to do things, you know, like I offer to pick up the groceries or whatever... because I know she has a busy schedule.*

Similarly, Pete discussed openness of communication and humor as making him feel close to Patricia.

> *A million things make me feel close to her. You know, you can track it sort of as because our relationship isn't that long-term yet. We've only been together for 2 years, and on the one hand that's long enough to know, and on the other hand it's long enough to know that there's a whole hell of a lot more to know. But, you know, so you start at certain points, for example, the first thing you want to know about the person is that they're the kind of person you want to be with and so, that*

> *openness of communication, that ability to talk about just about anything, a lot of laughter, humor, we laugh so much together! That's maybe another form of communication that I didn't mention before.*

For John, he expressed appreciation for the small things that made him feel connected to Jessica, which especially included talking to her on a daily basis.

> *I don't know what I would do if she wasn't around. Obviously, I would have to adapt and move on. I think that's the best part of the relationship- When I get up in the morning, I get up much earlier than she does and I can't go a day without giving her a kiss in the morning before I go and just asking her if she slept okay or to tell her to give me a call after lunch or that I will talk to her later. You know, just something to start the day off.... But, the most important thing is, no matter what it is, is just hearing her voice. Just saying a few words here and there. It's very important.... Even just to ask her how her day is going. How the kids are doing. How she is feeling. To see if everything is okay, if she's sad, that I miss her and love her.*

For Jessica and Rebecca, they indicated that when they are feeling closer to their partners, they are more conscious of the *way* they talk to their partners. For instance, Rebecca mentioned the following:

> *Well, it's better you know when we are getting along our communication is better just because we're more aware of the other person's feelings and more up to date with what's been happening with each other. And, I guess the desire is there, like in terms of wanting to keep getting along until something happens.... Um, yeah and just being more conscious of the other person's feelings, saying things in a nice tone of voice and you know, not demanding things. You know, like, if you want help with something, then there's a proper way to say it without, you know, nagging kind of thing.*

In the second sub-theme, all of the participants also discussed how being attuned to each other's needs made them feel closer to one another. For instance, Patricia noted that she and Pete do things for one another and these behaviours make them feel closer.

> *It works both ways. We have made it a rule- not a rule- it's all about him to me and for him, it's all about me and so, it's really hard to go wrong when your whole goal is to make the other person feel good because it's just this constant competition as to who can treat the other guy better!*

Sarah discussed how she and Sam will help each other out in order to meet each other's needs, despite whether it was what they necessarily wanted to do at the time or not.

> *Yeah and I like to think I'm sensitive to his needs... Sometimes I just give in! ... And so whether I'm not quite there or like if I don't feel necessarily 100 %, yeah, that's what I want to do right now, but that's what he needs. Sometimes I'll just do it because I know that's what he needs because I know sometimes it's rehearsed, because I know a lot of the times where I need something that he might not really be there, but he'll do it because he knows I need it.*

For Both Patricia and Sarah, they also recognized that their partners are able to sense what they need. For instance, Patricia stated the following:

> *I think that the closer we are, the less we have to talk and the more is said, if that makes any sense at all. I'll give you an example to put that in context. I woke up in the morning and I get up before he does and I always shower first and he's still in bed and he's sitting in front of the bed and I needed something, I don't know what it was, I don't know if I needed something from him or if I needed to tell him something or whatever it was, some reassurance or something. I just needed something. It had to happen. And, so I just went and sat down next to him and I just leaned over and I put my head on his shoulder and sat like that and it took about 10 seconds until he turned over and looked at me and he said, "Yeah, I know." And, he couldn't put his finger on it other than the fact that I needed something from him or I needed to tell him something, but I didn't know what it was and the only way I could do it was to come over and sit as close to him as possible until he got it and that was his perception of it.*

On the other hand, for Rob, he indicated that he would feel closer to Rebecca if she were more attentive to his needs.

> *Her being a little more attentive to my needs would be nice. Uh, maybe not being so quick to judge me on things, you know? ...Well, you know, like if she can see that I'm feeling stressed or whatever or once in awhile I like to do things with my friends or you know, stay in contact with my good friends. It would be nice if she could just say, "Well, why don't you go and do something with your friends?" You know? "Have a good time" or whatever. But, that's never happened.*

Both Pete and Patricia were aware of the necessity to give each other space when they were feeling stressed. Patricia also recognized that she and Pete needed to give each other space to pursue their hobbies and interests.

> *You know they say that you are supposed to have, you know, common interests and all that stuff and we look at each other and go, "Uh, no you don't. No, you don't!" Well, there's lots of things that we do, um, we both like to read, we're both voracious readers.... There's lots of things that I really enjoy that he totally doesn't get. Home decorating shows? The look on his face is so cute because he's so puzzled as to why anybody would wanna watch this stuff? That's ok! I'll watch that on Saturday. You can watch football on Sunday because I don't really wanna watch football. But, it makes him happy! "Honey, you need a beer? What's the score in the football game?" [laughs] "I love you!" So, what's a couple hours? So, he gets to watch the football game and he gets to drink beer and he gets all "roooooaaarrrr"! And, he feels good and he's happy and so then, hey, it's all good. It's good for me.*

In the third sub-theme, two of the participants discussed how their partners either challenged them or balanced them out. For instance, Patricia discussed how she and Pete sometimes challenge each other as a means of support.

> *I know he was having a pity party the other night and he was quite verbal about it. He wanted me to know what a piece of shit he was. So, and it was really, it was really satisfying for me to say, "Don't you ever say that about yourself. No, you know that's not true. You know that's not true!" I felt really bad after. I told him, "I was kinda harsh with you last night, like, you probably needed a bit of support." He said, "No, you did the right thing." He says, "Cause if you hadn't said those things," he says, "then I could've just kept on going. I coulda beaten the shit out of myself all night, " he said. So, he said, "When you say, you know, stop it. Stop it. I will not let you talk like this anymore. I will not stand for it. You're telling lies!" He said, "That's enough to make me stop"...*

Colin also talked about how Cathy has grounded him by challenging him to see a different perspective.

> *She's my rock, you know. I wouldn't be where I am. I can say that. I would probably be going down a different path than the one I'm currently running, you know. I'm not saying I'd be in jail or anything like that, but like I said, she kinda helps to keep me grounded. I tend to sit around and I can be not so stable, kind of emotionally, and again, I'm quite impulsive, so she kind of puts me back on the ground and makes me see the practical side of things.*

In the fourth sub-theme, both Jessica and Patricia discussed a feeling of "re-experiencing" love again. In Jessica's case, she felt it after she and John have had an argument and were "warming up" to each other again.

> *It's more just, you know, you have the distance and then it's almost pretty much like you warm back up. You can only be angry for so long. So, you're angry and then you just get tired of being angry so you warm up again. I'm like, I'm tired of being angry, whatever, I guess I like you again. Fine, I guess, I love you again.*

For Patricia, she described how her feelings for Pete intensified when he did something that touched her.

> *I use the term with him, "Oh my God, I think I just fell in love with you again." Or, "I'm falling in love with you again this week." And he, you know, the first couple times I said it, he said, "I thought you already did!" [laughs] And I said, "Yeah I did". Or, he'd say, "Oh, like did you fall out of love with me last week?" And, so he wasn't getting it. But, every once in awhile, he would do something or say something or like I'd walk into the room and he's bent over my son and they're doing homework together or they're laughing or joking and he gives me this little shifty look and he leans over and whispers something in my son's ear and they'll high five and they'll give me a look and keep little secrets from me and that kind of thing, like I just turn into a puddle of jello. You know? Here's this wonderful man just loving this boy, you know, and this boy loving this man, and oh, I just, you know, I wanna explode and I just well up and I, we go through that often and when I was able to finally explain to him what it is I'm feeling, then I say, "I'm falling in love with you again!"*

The fifth sub-theme included the men in this study being more likely to discuss how they noticed that factors such as mood, energy, and environment were important for creating intimacy. For instance, Sam talked about how he does not take it personally if Sarah is not in the mood for sex.

> *There are times when it comes to sex that she is just not in the mood- she's like, tired or not in that mind frame or whatever. So, I don't take it personally or jump to any conclusions about our relationship being in jeopardy or whatever. I just take it for what it is. But, if it became a habit, I'd want to address it with her for sure.*

As well, John mentioned that sometimes they just needed to accept that the environment is not conducive to intimacy. However, he noted that he made an effort to create a positive environment for intimacy.

> *I try to strive to make a good environment, an acceptable environment for being intimate together, closeness and everything like that. So, I might try to set the mood by doing something nice for her. Try not to talk about something that would wreck the mood.... I try not to think about negative things and I try to focus on the positive to set a tone for our intimacy and our time together. Being that it's a fast paced life and everything like that and the world is rapidly running a thousand miles an hour, I want to make the best of the time that we do have together and I think it's just a waste if you focus on the negative things.*

Colin also talked about behaviours he engages in to "set the mood" for intimacy.

> *All she really has to do is be nice to me and I will completely go out of my way to get close to her. There's nothing I wouldn't do. You know? So, I try to do stuff like bring home flowers for no apparent reason, compliment her and stuff like that and that kind of lets her know what kind of head space I'm in- that I would like to be intimate.*

To summarize this theme, the participants described a number of behaviours that they felt encouraged or promoted them to feel closer to one another. The sub-themes that arose within this theme included being more open and sharing more with each other, being attuned to each other's needs, challenging each other and balancing one another out, "re-experiencing" love (arose amongst some of the women only), and awareness of mood and environment when connecting (arose amongst some of the men only). The second sub-theme, which included the partners being attuned to each other's needs, produced the most responses within this theme. It appears as though the couples felt closest to one another when they did things to make each other happy or because they knew it was important to the other person. As well, when one partner gave the other partner what they needed with no self-serving motivations, these acts appeared to create

closeness and intimacy within the relationships. At the same time, it appeared to have a negative impact when one partner did not accept the giving partner's offer of help or support (e.g., Rebecca not accepting Rob's offer to help with errands when she was busy). Overall, though, the couples provided a number of descriptions of positive behaviours that made them feel closer/more attached to their partners.

Beliefs About Intimacy.

Another theme that arose among some of the participants was that of expressing their beliefs about intimacy/closeness/attachment. In this theme, the participants discussed their views of how they like to act in relationships, what they expect from their partners, and their assessments of how intimacy has manifested itself in their relationships. The sub-themes within this theme included thoughts on the appropriateness or preferences for affection, achieving "detached attachment," and feeling different types of closeness depending on the relationship phase.

In the first sub-theme, both Colin and Sarah (not a couple) expressed their views on affection. For instance, Colin mentioned the following:

> *I like to* give *affection. I don't necessarily like someone draped all over me all the time. I don't mind it. I enjoy the physical touch and the physical affection, but I enjoy giving it more than I think I enjoy getting it.*

In Sarah's case, she is not a very affectionate person, yet she believes that she can express affection in other ways than the typical physical way.

> *You can get close to someone and you don't have to hug your friends or partner all the time. Just by being there for them and listening to them and you know, if they needed to talk, then I guess, just be a friend and just, what do friends do, they listen, they need things, you get things for them, you offer your help, you take turns taking kids to preschool.... Yeah, and if you do need someone to talk to and you are feeling emotional, even though you're not technically being like "touchy-*

> *feely," you can still share how you're feeling with them and they'll still listen and they'll make you feel better.*

Pete also discussed how spirituality has played a role in helping him to know that he is in the right relationship for him.

> *I think for us, we're really exploring the spirituality of our relationship, in terms of how we relate to each other on a level that you can't really touch and for me that's a huge issue for why I know that this relationship is good and on the right path, is that sense that I can't really explain to you, but sort of an internal and this goes* way *beyond infatuation, it's just this inner peace that says, "Yeah, this is good." Can I define that? I don't know.... But, getting in touch with my own spirituality has led me to sort of trust my inner voice to say this is a good thing. Is that emotion? I don't know. Or is it that combination of emotion and intellect that gets combined into spirit I think.*

Coincidentally, Patricia had a similar comment to make about their intimacy being more than just physical.

> *Um, we're extremely intimate and that's in a non-physical way, because this isn't about the physical way in which we're intimate, because it's nothing but a byproduct of intimacy. Emotional and mental intimacy is true intimacy.*

The second sub-theme involved a very thought-provoking description of an idea that was a unique perspective about attachment that Pete called "detached attachment."

> *I can speak for myself in saying that and if it doesn't work out somewhere down the line, that's ok too. And, so for me, what lets* me *know that I can handle the closeness in our relationship, is just knowing that this attachment that I feel to her isn't the kind of attachment that's going to fall apart when she's not there, in terms of if she dies or we break up for one reason or another or something happens to our relationship, it's good now and that's good enough and when it's not good anymore and we have to deal with it when the time comes, why worry about it now? ... In a sense it doesn't matter. It matters enough to want to work on the relationship to keep it good. That's for sure important. We both acknowledge the importance of working on the relationship. But, we both also say that everybody makes promises that are their best intentions at the time. So, we're not going to live now in the fear that we're going to break these promises somewhere down the road. Well, we're making these promises now in good faith... So, it's "detached attachment." Because really that's what it is. We're attached, there's no question. And, so much like, Zen Buddhism wants to talk about being totally detached from everything, which to me almost sounds like a lack of attachment,*

> *but if that's what they're talking about, I don't want it! Because it's, yeah, I'm attached, but I can be detached if I need to be.*

In clarifying what he meant by "detached attachment" after the interview was over, Pete indicated the following:

> *Occasionally I deal with a bit of insecurity in our relationship, which I probably didn't express very much in the interview. The insecurity is not in the relationship per se, because our relationship is excellent. My insecurity relates to my own psychological/personal issues, along with the baggage of a previously-failed marriage. What I was trying to say in this statement is that, one way for me to cope with this insecurity is to remind myself that what we have now is good (excellent, actually!). I have no way of determining how "good" the relationship will be in the future. All I can do is take responsibility for my own part in keeping the relationship good and deal with the problems when they come up. I don't want to (although sometimes I do anyway) project my insecurities into the future; I'd rather deal with them when they come up. In addition to what I said in the interview (i.e., that we develop a rhythm of being there for each other, and giving each other space), "detached attachment" means that I don't (want to) obsess about the future. I'm "attached" to [Patricia] but I don't want to get into the mindset that my life will be over if our relationship ever ends, so I need to have some "detachment" from the idea that my future survival is dependent on the survival of our relationship.*

In the third sub-theme, some of the participants discussed how their feelings for their partners have changed (or may change in the future) depending on the phase of the relationship they are experiencing at the time. For example, Jessica mentioned experiencing some changes throughout the course of her relationship as to the level of closeness she has felt with John.

> *Right now, I think we are more close almost as friends because the intimacy is not there as much at the moment partly due to the kids and the busyness, but, we are slowly trying to work on that. But, I mean, with our closeness, it's a closeness I think as we are each other's best friend and that's never going to change.... I think initially you're close as you lust after each other in the beginning, so, it's different I think. And then you grow into the friendship role and the parental role.*

In Patricia's case, she noticed that because she and Pete came together at the right time in their lives, they are able to be closer with one another than if they met at a previous time in their lives.

> *Oh, it feels like I just met him yesterday.... What do you know about each other in a year of living together and you know, 6 or 7 months of dating? Like, not that much really. But, on the other hand, it feels like we're so comfortable, it feels like we've lived together forever, it feels like we've been together for the last 20 years.... On the other hand, we also know that 20 years ago, we would have looked at each other and gone, "Ewww, I don't think so!" because of the lives we were leading. It took all of the crap to get to where we are so that we are the people that we are to be together. It's, like I don't believe in God, but if there is a God, he put us right there, you know at that time and place because there was no way we were ever going to meet. Yeah, we both say, "It's something bigger than we are." We can't know it; we can't understand what the heck is going on because it's too easy. It's just* too *easy. We have both lived long enough to know that life is not this easy. But is it?*

As well, Pete talked about feeling like he is with the right person because he is experiencing very strong feelings for Patricia. However, he also recognized that this may be a relationship phase and that they may eventually move into a different phase.

> *So, first of all, there's that sense of compatibility, like we actually have qualities about each other that the other guy likes. Um, you know, you go through, you know, the whole infatuation phase, which we're not sure when it's supposed to end! And, so we stop every once in awhile and go, "Why do we feel like teenagers? This is ridiculous. Like, it's gotta stop at some point." And, it hasn't. So, we are just willing to go with it as long as it does and when, if it ever sort of dwindles, that's not going to mean the end of the relationship, it just means we're moving onto another phase. So, it's just an awareness I guess that we're "gaga" and that's ok, it's just a fun phase to kinda go through. So, the ability to talk about those kinds of things is I think what gives me the most sense of, let's call it security, in the relationship, to know that this can work out.*

Ironically, Patricia also seemed to be questioning whether their closeness is due to a relationship phase. However, she also questions whether it is healthy to be that close to someone.

> *Well, it's funny because we've actually had that conversation. Is this healthy? You know, when does this honeymoon phase wear off? Like, we're not 16 year-old kids experiencing this for the first time. Well, we're experiencing this for the first time and maybe this is how it's supposed to be, but we're still wondering, like, you know, when does that infatuation wear off? Yeah, we can be in separate rooms, but we don't wanna be. Is that healthy? Maybe we're in some sort of really sick, twisted relationship and we don't even know it.*

Therefore, this particular theme arose amongst some of the participants where they chose to share their beliefs about how they view intimacy or what they expect may happen in the future. The sub-themes discussed within this theme included thoughts on the appropriateness or preferences for affection, achieving "detached attachment," and feeling different types of closeness depending on the relationship phase. Naturally, some of the participants were more comfortable with affection than others and this seemed to sometimes create difficulties when their partners had different levels of comfort with affection. Again, the participants seemed to have realistic views about how their intimacy or feelings of closeness may change depending on the phase of their relationship. Pete, in particular, described his belief about a concept he referred to as "detached attachment," which involved having a healthy sense of attachment to your partner so that you do not lose yourself in the process or become too dependent on that person for your happiness. This particular belief is a very intriguing idea, which will be explored further in the "Discussion" chapter.

Gender Issues with Intimacy.

Another brief theme that arose in this area amongst some of the participants included gender issues with intimacy, or noticing when "typical" male vs. "typical female" traits impacted intimacy or feelings of closeness in some way. As well, one participant discussed experiencing a "role reversal" with intimacy. For Colin, he admitted

to sometimes behaving in a "White Knight Syndrome" fashion when it came to protecting Cathy.

> *I turn into the fighter and my therapist says "white knight." I have "white knight syndrome." I want to come and rescue and come to your defense and yeah, he called you a name? You just tell him to come here. Tell him to get within kicking distance! I'll take care of him! Figuratively speaking of course. I'm not generally a violent person by nature I don't think... there are points in time when you can only be pushed so far and there are certain things that push your buttons.*

Sam also admitted to not asking for help because he is afraid of appearing "weak" or not "manly" enough.

> *I guess I've just always chose not to ask her for help. I'd like to say something, but, I don't know if I feel like I'm, like maybe that I'm weak or not enough of a "man" or what, I'm not sure what makes me do that. I think I've always preferred to try and work things out myself without asking for help. That's tough sometimes because she really has no clue what's going on in my head at the time!*

For Rebecca, she discussed how she believes that Rob's interest in sex when they are not talking to one another is likely a "gender" issue.

> *When we're not talking to each other I don't have interest in sex, it's like, you know, "don't even touch me!" kind of thing. And then, you know, when things are going well, you know, we're both quite affectionate. So, yeah, it totally depends on how we're getting along. Whereas, I find- maybe that's a gender thing- he, you know, he isn't really that way, he doesn't harbor like resentment feelings that would cause him not to want to touch me I don't think. Like, I could probably throw myself at him when he's angry and he'd be fine with that! Whereas, I would be like, "Get outta here!" You know? "Go away!" So, I guess that would be a gender thing.*

On the other hand, Cathy described how she and Colin have experienced a "role reversal" with regards to typical gender behaviour in intimacy. Cathy then went on to discuss how she and Colin have different motivations for sex (i.e., physical release vs. intimacy).

> *I think for me it's, it can revolve around the intimacy and I'm going, [tap tap tap with her fingers], "When?" [laughs] It's the opposite of the stereotypical, the man's always saying yes and the woman is saying no. It's the reverse of that and we're totally not on the same page. He wants all of his stress to be gone before he*

> *even thinks about it, whereas I'm going, [tap, tap, tap], I'm in my prime! I don't care about your stress! Who cares about making love? Sometimes you just wanna have sex! And, I think it's a matter of which one are you looking for? Are you looking for a release or are you looking for intimacy and closeness? ... It kind of plays in a vicious circle with him that if we're not feeling close, then he doesn't want to. It's very much a reverse stereotype, where he's got the "girl" feelings for it and I've got the "guy" feelings for it , sort of thing- for the stereotypical what you're looking for out of it and that's been going on for a long time now- years of a long time.*

She then expressed feeling somewhat hopeless about resolving this issue.

> *I think that revolves around the sexual intimacy mostly and that's, yeah, cause it's always all about him and what he wants and it's never about what I want or need as the case may be, whatever, not need to survive, but you know, yeah, that's always what he wants and never what I want.*

Similar to gender becoming an issue in the communication category, it has again surfaced in the attachment category as creating difficulties with achieving intimacy. Some of the participants engaged in "stereotypical" gender behaviour, such as a man not wanting to appear "weak" or attempting to "rescue" his partner, but there was also the case of "role reversal" in intimacy, where the partners acted in the opposite fashion of "typical" gender behaviour. Therefore, these couples appear to be dealing with both typical and atypical gender behaviour, rather than struggling in one area or the other.

Previous Romantic Attachments.

Another theme that arose amongst all of the participants was that of how previous relationships or romantic attachments have impacted the experience of intimacy within their current relationships. The participants seemed to mainly focus on what did not work in their previous relationships and how they did not want to repeat those mistakes. For example, Colin admitted to having very little trust in his past relationships and Pete

discussed how his previous partner used name-calling and attacked him verbally. Pete stated:

> *...A totally different perspective than what I'm used to, which is "You dirty bastard!" You know? And on and on. And, how do you solve anything with somebody who's just on the attack all the time and so that makes me then obviously not wanna be on the attack...*

Sam also described a previous dysfunctional relationship.

> *My first marriage was a bad experience all around because we just fought all the time and we were both miserable. It was like we ended up not even liking each other anymore by the end of it. I don't want to, you know, repeat a situation like that where things get so bad that you can't even stand to be in the same room with the person. I think I learned to start watching for the warning signs now... like when you can't even talk anymore because all you do is yell!*

Rebecca noted that she is now more aware of what works and what doesn't based on her experiences from her first marriage.

> *I think that I've, it's given me some experience for sure. Um, I don't know in what way. I guess maybe I can think of like not putting myself in a situation that would put our trust at risk, if that makes sense. Like, you know, in my first marriage, um, we lived in an area that was very remote, but we both worked, you know, far away from where we lived. And so, I remember, you know, going to work functions without my husband and you know, not doing anything, but, it still, it still had an impact on the marriage because we weren't doing things, a lot of things as a couple and so, I think, you know, in some ways that led to... problems. And, so just things like that, like being more aware of what works and what doesn't work, I think before I do things.*

For Jessica, she discussed how her previous intimate experiences were easier and this becomes an issue when she sometimes compares the past to the present. John, on the other hand, learned to trust his instincts, as he knew that he did not want to pursue any of his previous relationships further.

> *Honestly, it's a waste of your time pursuing something that you think is going to be a lost cause. I have always been a type of person that said, "Trust your instincts." I'll tell my kids that too. If something seems wrong, you shouldn't really question your spirit and your essence. You should be listening to that. Life*

> *is way too short and that time that you've been doubting yourself, the right person could have been there already.*

As a result, some of the participants expressed how their previous romantic relationships impacted their ability to get close to their current partners. Many of the responses appeared to be in the area of trust, where they lacked trust in their previous relationships and they wanted to rectify that problem in their current relationships. It appears that these participants hoped to learn from their previous mistakes in order to improve the intimacy level and strength of their current relationships.

Childhood Experiences.

All of the participants discussed their childhood experiences that have influenced their ability to form attachments with people. The responses were delineated into either positive experiences that encouraged them to get close to others or negative experiences that taught them to either be black and white with trusting people or to avoid forming attachments. John and Jessica both described positive childhood experiences. John described observing his parents argue often, but he stated that they were also close and that they defended each other a great deal. Jessica had the following to say about her childhood:

> *My parents- they had a good relationship and they were very close. We had a good, close family and they had a lot of friends around. I have seen a lot of that growing up.*

She clarified what gave her the indication that they were "close:"

> *We ate dinner together every night, hugged all the time. We just always had that physical contact- just that very caring nature all the time. It was just always there, I guess.*

Pete also described how he learned that it is acceptable to trust and depend on others through his childhood experiences.

> *Well, I think as a child I learned that it's definitely ok to trust family. So, that's probably why I'm so close to family. And I think I've learned to discern who I can trust and who I should be wary of- not that I would write anybody off, but I think I have learned through childhood experiences sort of the shady from, as much as a person can, you know, I can't read people that well, but I think yeah, I think I can kinda tell... you've got some, probably some issues you need to work out if you're willing to, you don't have any boundaries and you're willing to just trust people you've met once or for the first time. Yeah, so that's a childhood learning thing for sure.*

However, Pete has also observed patterns of avoidance from his parents' relationship and he has since realized that these patterns cause difficulties in relationships.

> *I learned positively that relationships and so much communication in relationships is about the other guy sooner than it's about me. My parents always put the other guy first and that was really cool. But, they also didn't communicate a lot. I think a lot of stuff went unsaid. My mom particularly was manipulative in body language and guilt tripping and stuff like that and my dad was kind of oblivious. Maybe they were complimentary that way. He didn't seem to be affected by it. If you're not going to talk to me about it, I don't care.... So, when I was growing up I learned that any kind of conflict was bad and you should avoid conflict.*

He was then forced to change his pattern when he entered into a conflictual relationship with his ex-wife.

> *I got into a relationship that was highly conflictual! Quite the opposite to the family I grew up in and I was forced to deal with the reality of conflict. I didn't do very well. I failed! [laughs] Well, just in terms of a failed marriage, you know?*

Sarah discussed a childhood experience where she felt as though she was "raised in a bubble" believing that people are trustworthy, yet she later learned from her life experiences that this is often not the case.

> *Well, I kinda feel like I was raised in a bubble sometimes, you know? My parents are, you know, they're, this is going to come out wrong... but they're religious people... and you were raised in this, "life is good," "people are good" ... and*

> *my parents have you know, they've been married for 36 years. They haven't always gotten along, but I, like, through growing up, my dad has always supported my mom and respected my mom and all those things obviously affect what I would expect from a relationship now.... But then, when you get into the world and you think, you're believing everybody and everybody's good, when really, they're not... and moreso as you grow older you think, "Ok, there's even less people that are good." But, I guess I think my positiveness, my positive outlook on life would come from my childhood and the part that isn't so positive just comes from life experiences.*

Patricia, on the other hand, described some negative childhood experiences that could have influenced her future relationships, yet she did not acquire such trust issues.

> *...But, I don't know where that trust comes from. I really don't. My parents split up, my father was an alcoholic, he bribed my brother and I to move back in with him, he lied to us, he treated us poorly, that was my father figure, you know? You know, I married a guy just like him [first husband]. Still to this day, all these years later, I still trust him. I don't know? I don't know where it comes from. I should stop being naïve! I should be.*

Cathy, Colin, and Rebecca all discussed some childhood experiences that have made getting close to others difficult for them. In Cathy's case, she discussed how she learned mistrust from her childhood. For Colin, growing up in an authoritarian household taught him to be extremist with trusting people.

> *I think that, in some way, because of the type of person that my father was and the shift work and the job that he did and the way he treated people, which wasn't necessarily bad, but again, very authoritarian and "You will do it, you will do it this way" and "We're going to clean the house on Saturday" and "No, you don't get to go anywhere before you...". You know, that whole very strict kind of militaristic point of view. It tends to make you not trust being with...you always think there's another agenda going on here. ... And again, it goes back to extremism. Once you've got that trust, I'm pretty loyal to you.*

Rebecca described how she learned to be over-responsible from her childhood experiences. She then made a connection between her parents' relationship and how she acts in her current relationship and as a mother.

> *Well, I think I was probably over-responsible. I grew up in a house where my dad wasn't around much and my mom was ill, like physically ill, so you know, I was, like, cleaning the house by age 11 from top to bottom and you know, I was doing things that probably most kids didn't do. So, I always felt like a sense of probably "over-responsibility." You know, I, you know, didn't have as much time as other kids to be a kid and so, uh, I'm sure that's affected me as an adult. Just, you know, with my kids, like I probably expect more from them than maybe another parent would and um, I just have this sense of like,* duty *to so many things that I think comes from there, you know, like...? And it gets to be a bit much at times. ... So, yeah, I can see that being inherited.*

Rob also described a childhood home environment that did not include much affection or emotional expression.

> *I don't really even remember there really being any, you know, like any emotional exchange or anything like that. I don't remember any of that. I just remember them living together, that's all I remember. They didn't have a close relationship cause my dad worked shifts, shift work, and my mom worked...but I don't really remember them being at home at the same time very much.*

Thus, when the participants discussed having positive childhood experiences, it appeared as though they carried these positive aspects into their romantic relationships and those participants who had negative childhood experiences similarly carried those negative behaviours into their romantic relationships. As in the above theme on how previous romantic attachments impacted their relationships, it appears as though their trust level was impacted by their childhood experiences. For at least one participant though (Sarah), negative life experiences superceded her positive childhood experiences and contributed to her difficulties with developing intimacy in relationships.

Trusting Others vs. Trusting Partner.

Along with childhood experiences, the whole group of participants discussed their feelings about trusting other people in general, as well as their partners. In some cases, the participants had similar views about trusting others and their partners. In other cases, the

participants viewed trusting others as something very different from trusting their partners. The women in this study were more likely to be consistent with either depending on or trusting their partners and others or not trusting their partners and others; whereas, the men in this study were more likely to feel comfortable depending on/trusting their partners than doing so with others. On the other hand, some of the participants felt that their ability to trust was more closely tied to their personalities than any other life experiences. John had the following to say about depending on other people:

> *I'm not comfortable with that at all. I can't allow myself to depend on somebody else. Like, for example, borrowing twenty dollars from a friend. It would eat me alive until I paid it back. I think I strive in an environment that if people need me, that's a lot easier for me to accept... In the most part, I don't rely on other people or try to rely on other people. But, I don't mind if people have to rely on me for help. I rather prefer it that way. Kind of like someone owing you a favour. I have no problem with that. I just don't really want to be the person that owes somebody else.*

When it comes to depending on Jessica however, he is more comfortable with this, possibly because he seems to view himself as also providing her with help when she needs it as well.

> *I need more to help me with kids though. I think the every daily routine things, I don't really think about that. That doesn't really bother me. I mean, maybe if I think about it, I try to help out a little bit extra or go a little extra mile to help her out. For example, give her a chance to sit down with [child] or just get off her feet. So, I don't mind doing the more physical things or mental things if it will give her a little bit of a break. On occasion, I do take advantage of her, like I sit down, do this or that, take a break, relax.*

As mentioned in the previous theme, Colin tends to be "black and white" with trusting people. In this sense, he is unlikely to trust others unless he is totally certain he can trust them. However, he trusts Cathy "implicitly."

> *Well, I trust her [partner] implicitly. There's nothing I wouldn't let her do- within reason, knowing what her capabilities are. Obviously, I wouldn't ask her to do*

> *something that's outside of what her capabilities are. But, if I think it's within her capabilities at all, even if I sometimes, even if I think that I'm going to be better suited to do a task or whatever, anything like that. If she wants to do it, I will let her. So, from that standpoint, sometimes I think I put too much trust and faith in what she does and says and, you know, I tend to take the back seat role sometimes in that. I'll let her just do her thing and put my trust in her that she knows what she's doing.*

While Cathy discussed a similar "black and white" attitude about trusting others, she was equally "black and white" about trusting Colin. For instance, Cathy said this about trusting others:

> *It really depends on I guess the "aura" that they're putting off. I get, I can get really attached really fast, but I've been burned a lot of times. So, if the aura doesn't feel right, then they probably won't get the feelings of closeness. It doesn't "click" because I just don't get the right "feel." If I do get the right feel, then it's like two magnets coming together. You can be close in a matter of no time at all.*

In regards to Colin, Cathy had a similar response:

> *Generally speaking for a lot of, we have some major trust issues, but there are other things that I trust him implicitly with. That is an issue with us is how can I trust him completely with some things and not at all with others. He doesn't understand how he can trust me totally, and whereas, my level of trust with him really varies depending on the subject matter.*

Rebecca was also consistent with having difficulty trusting Rob, as well as others. For instance, she discussed how trust issues arose in her relationship with Rob as far back as 13 years old.

> *We dated, you know, really, really young. We were 13 and you know, it seems silly now but you know, a trust issue came up there, like he you know, would be with someone else and I'd find out and you know, I suppose a person remembers that. He also lies about his drinking so the next time he says, "Oh, I didn't have anything," I'll be like, "Yeah right!" But, I don't know if, I think it would, those issues would be there anyway. That's just the type of person I am with not really trusting people to do things the way I want them done. You know what I mean? Like, it's not just trusting about fidelity or alcohol, it's like the giving him a grocery list and kinda worrying about, is he gonna get what I want? You know?*

Interestingly, Rob appears to sense Rebecca's distrust of him.

> *Well, I feel she doesn't trust me, like, all the time, you know? Like, there's, there's that jealousy thing. You know? I feel that, I still think that because of the relationship with her father, she kinda blankets me into the same thing, she doesn't trust me, you know? And myself, I trust her. She goes away on business trips, well she used to go every year, but I didn't have a problem with her going. It didn't bother me, so... but, if I were to go out with some friends and play some pool or something, it's like it would be a 100 questions the next day: Where were you? Who were you with? Even though we went to the same place all the time with the same people all the time once a month or once every few months.*

For Pete, Patricia, and Sarah, they seemed to attribute their willingness to trust to such characteristics of their personalities. For instance, Pete talked about how despite their past negative relationship experiences, he and Patricia are both the types of people to place full trust in their partners.

> *And, I found myself all of a sudden, I'm going to use the term "waking up," not necessarily because I was sleeping, but that sense of awareness, that, oh my God, I'm really trusting this person! Can I do that? Is this safe? It wasn't last time, so why should it be this time? ... And yet, you know, I'm an "all in" guy and she's an "all in" girl and so, we've just gone all in and kinda said to hell with other people from the past who might have affected us negatively. I don't know why. It's not like we've ever sat down and worked that out in our therapy or whatever to try and work that through. Just, I don't know. We just feel safe enough and so we risk it and we haven't been burned, so...*

Sarah also admitted to being skeptical of both her partner and others in general because it is in her "nature" to be this way.

> *He [partner] has moments where I'm skeptical. I don't know if it's because... I think I probably, those times where I'm ok, you're not being totally honest with me, it's not him not being honest with me, it's just him thinking it's not important information to share and so it makes me second guess the next time he says something, but it's only because it's just natural I guess for me to think that it's not the truth. It's not a first reaction to say, "Ok, everybody's being honest with me and the whole world is kind to each other," and you know, I know that it's not, so I know that people lie to each other even though they don't* mean *to hurt each other. That's reality. So, I guess I would say that I trust him, yes, the odd time where it might seem like I don't, it's only because it's my nature to suspect people.*

However, when it comes to expressing affection, Sarah indicated that she found this process easier with friends and family than with her partner.

> *Well, I think for me, I just find it easier to be affectionate with like my girlfriends and my family than I would in a relationship. I think it's just one of those weird things that I do in relationships where I'm not, I'd like to say emotionally available, just because I think I don't just open- I don't wear my heart on my sleeve. I guess I'm a bit more of the, I wouldn't say cynical, cause it never sounds positive when you say it like that. But, I've been more cautious I guess...*

Therefore, to summarize this theme, it appears that the women were more consistent with either trusting or not trusting both their partners and others in their lives. On the other hand, the men were more likely to delineate between feeling comfortable trusting their partners, but being more hesitant to do this with others. As well, a few of the participants believed that their ability to trust either their partner or others had more to do with their personality style or nature than it did with previous life experiences. At any rate, trust was again an issue that arose as being a key element to creating and developing intimacy.

Couples Counselling

Lastly, the themes that arose in the area of couples counselling for the couples will be presented. Please see Table 3 for a summary of themes within this category.

Table 3

Summary of Couples Counselling Themes

Couples Counselling
Interventions to Help the Relationship
Gaining Awareness about the Relationship
Learning New Skills and Refreshing Old Skills
Counselling Barriers
Slipping Back into Old Patterns
Impacts of Counselling on Attachment/Closeness

Interventions to Help the Relationship.

All of the participants in this study attended couples counselling. The amount of sessions attended ranged from approximately six sessions to several sessions over a period of 2 or 3 years. A few of the couples also attended workshops to assist them with communication in their relationships, such as a "Couple Communication" workshop and a "Succeeding as a Step Family" workshop. As well, some of the participants were simultaneously attending individual counselling along with their couples counselling, or had done so in the past. In addition, a few of the participants attended other personal development and/or academic courses that they felt improved their ability to communicate; which in turn, impacted their communication in their relationships. For

example, Patricia made the following comments about the courses she has taken on the subject.

> *Well, it's all the same concepts. It's just putting it all into context and a lot of it is, like I've done, like, leadership and personal best and so, the core fundamental in all that stuff is focus on the situation or the behaviour, not the person. It's an issue or a situation or a behaviour. It has nothing to do with the person. That's the core fundamental in communication.... I have all the theory, everybody, I mean anybody can get the theory, but if you can't put it into practice, it's not doing any good. Now that said, the other person has to be open to it.... I'm trying to do it right. So, it only works if the other person lets it work.*

Cathy had the following to say about attending individual counselling along with couples counselling:

> *I think in your individual, you deal with, not necessarily individual communication, because I think that's kind of part and parcel with general, personal counselling. It's improving because you learning to talk about what's bothering you in individual counselling and ways of dealing with it effectively.... I think there's almost, it's, it has to run somewhat simultaneously, but you've got to get the individual good foundation first before you can do the couples, because if you're not ok yourself, how are you going to be ok as a couple?*

Pete also expressed his view on the need to work through your own issues so that you don't transfer them onto your partner.

> *I think it is so important that your partner not be your therapist, which is default when you don't have a therapist, right? Because, we all need to work through our issues and we need somebody else to do that with and certainly there are times when we do use each other that way, that's not my point, because you know, it's a close relationship. But, when it comes down to really working out the "nitty gritty" of your life, it's way too much of a burden to put on somebody else and they're not trained for it. And, so, the stuff that I've been able to work through with my therapist just makes me a better person, which you know, obviously impacts my relationship with her.... So then, by being able to work it through in this environment over here, then I can come back and with the idea internally here, I'm working it through. It's ok, I can go on with my regular we'll call them duties of work and relationships and parenting and whatever. So... Plus, I mean, therapy itself just works so much on communication, because communication is such a vital part to relationships.*

Thus, while all of the couples had a different combination of types of

interventions to help their relationships, they all received assistance in this area. Some of the participants also advocated for first attending individual therapy to address your own personal issues first and then placing more focus specifically on the relationship. As well, it was noted by some of the participants that communication is a skill that can be learned in other courses and situations, which in turn has a beneficial impact on the couple relationship.

Gaining Awareness about the Relationship.

In discussing their couples counselling experiences, a theme that arose among several of the participants was gaining awareness about their relationships. Included in this category was gaining awareness about how you and your partner behave in the relationship and taking responsibility for how you behave in the relationship (the latter arose amongst some of the women only). Colin became aware of how his behaviour played a role in the chain of events that created the need for he and Cathy to get counselling.

> *Usually when we were trying to work through something that's, you know, there's been something... something kinda major that's happened... Usually it has to do with me! Most of the time it's something I've done! And I'm comfortable with that. You know, one of those things that's caused a big enough issue that, you know, we were kinda going, ok, I gotta... we're either gonna have to do something about this and you know, work through this or we're just not gonna be able to be together. Is that what we want? ... For a long time, one of my favorite expressions was, "Fine! I'm leaving!". And that expression got us into couples counselling! ... It was kind of a "get your attention" kind of a thing. In my headspace, that's what I was thinking. I'm not actually gonna do it, but this should get your attention.*

Cathy indicated that one of the biggest awarenesses she had was learning how she and Colin might have been misinterpreting each other's messages.

> *More we just, while we were talking when one of the examples would come up, our therapist would say, "Now here's an example of what's happening. Is this what Y's hearing and is this what X is actually saying? I think correct me if I'm wrong" kind of thing. Or, "Is this what Y's saying and this is what X is hearing. Can you see the other person's side of it?" And, "Can you understand how they could have taken it different than what you were meaning?" So, it was a bit of an awareness thing because we didn't realize that we weren't actually getting across what we were trying to say to each other, which kinda makes communication pretty difficult!*

Colin also discussed becoming more aware of his own arousal levels and how learning some relaxation techniques have been helpful for him.

> *So, I've...yeah, I'm much better at, well, better, at recognizing before it happens, you know, learning how to breathe and walk away and again, I'm becoming a lot more educated in, just even in the last month. Like, I've since found out that it's physically impossible to be relaxed and aroused at the same time, which I figured happened all the time because I lay on the couch dozing, watching the hockey game and then Vancouver scores, I yell and scream.... But, apparently, it's not physiologically possible to be relaxed and aroused at the same time. So, BREATHE, is what I've been told!*

However, he was very candid about the difficulties he sometimes has in implementing the skills he has learned.

> *Learning it and practicing it are...again, like I said, I'm really good at talking the talk and I have all the information. Sometimes, practicing it is a lot different than learning it.... You know, we want other people to do it the other way, but we want to do it this way. And, I see that a lot, not just in my couple communication, but generally in society, we tend to put the onus on other people a lot.*

On the other hand, Pete discussed how he was able to implement some communication skills he has learned.

> *Actually, I think the biggest thing is awareness, just to be, communication theory helps me to be aware of how I'm communicating, whether that's in the giving or receiving of it. Am I communicating in a way that is understandable? Am I even understanding this person? Am I even listening? You know, just that awareness, for sure... So, I would, where does a person pick up that awareness unless they get some education in one form or another, whether it's formal or not. Yeah and I've read tons of books on communication too, especially intimate relationships.*

Sarah also talked about having an insightful moment in counselling that gave her some clarity about how she and Sam were interacting and provided her with an opportunity to express her emotions.

> *I feel like I was just mad at him for putting me through this, if that makes sense? So, I was, it was really therapeutic for me to tell him that though because I think I've been doing that whole, "Life is wonderful. Everything is fine..." ... So, anyways, long story short, me communicating with him and me being able to do that because usually it would have turned into an argument, but the therapist insisted on asking me why I was so angry and I guess she just asked the right question or whatever and I was able to tell him why I was angry. You know, like the light bulb had gone on why I was so angry. You know, delayed reaction or something for something that had happened the weekend before or whatever.*

The female participants reported being aware of how taking responsibility for one's behaviour can be helpful towards the relationship. For instance, Cathy noted that although Colin has a higher awareness of his behaviour, he still falls short in taking responsibility for some of his actions.

> *He does have a conscious awareness of some things that maybe weren't being done as effectively as they could have been doing, but the other thing that I notice, I can't even remember what section they were on, but he likes to use "we" when it should be "he." And, even if it should be "we," you've got to be able to take ownership of it being yours, whether somebody else has the same problem or not.*

As well, Sarah also expressed that she hoped that Sam would eventually gain a better understanding of his issues through his individual counselling and/or their couples counselling. At the same time, she discussed gaining awareness about the need to *not* take responsibility for an issue that was related specifically to Sam.

> *Well, I think it's more like, he has an anger issue and at first I thought it was, I don't know, maybe I was provoking his anger and he's not normally an angry person and all of a sudden, I'm like, "Oh my God, why are you so angry? This is nothing to get angry about." ... And I even bought a book about anger thinking that ok, maybe I'm the angry one... Long story short, I'm reading this book going ok, this is so* not *me... and it literally got to the point where like, if he can't get counselling, I'm sorry, I can't do this, you know, where you turn into this evil*

> *monster every couple of weekends because you know, and I think it's just him avoiding dealing with his emotions and conflict and just probably for his entire life, where I've grown up in a stable environment he hasn't and... Eventually, it starts showing in your work and everything in your life until it's staring you in the face and you have to deal with it, which is basically where we're at now.*

On the other hand, Rebecca talked about questioning who needs to take responsibility for problems between she and Rob and feeling confused about this.

> *Yeah and I still feel like sometimes whether I don't know if my concern is justified, like maybe I'm the one with the problem. You know what I mean? Like, it's all these doubts and he at times feels like he's a problem and at other times, it's my problem. You're the one making a big deal of it. So, it's sort of a struggle for us to figure out who is responsible for what.*

Hence, several of the participants noted that they gained more awareness about their relationships through their participation in couples counselling, which included awareness about their own behaviour, as well as that of their partners. As well, some of the female participants indicated that they wanted their partners to take more responsibility for their part in the relationship problems and they realized they should not take responsibility for a problem that they do not own. To add, one female participant felt confused about who should be taking responsibility for problems in her relationship.

Learning New Skills and Refreshing Old Skills.

Another theme arose in the area of what skills the participants learned, along with the necessity to refresh old skills or maintain previous changes. The newly learned skills that were described by some of the participants included increasing the amount of communication, "getting back to the basics" in communication, and resolving conflicts more effectively. Jessica had the following to say about how going to counselling increased the amount of communication she and John had, which, in and of itself, improved their relationship.

> *It has impacted our communication. It's been good for us to, it's just been helpful to actually communicate, period, I think. It was the biggest thing. Before, there was a lot of lack of communication. Now, when you sit down with someone impartial, then it forces you both to say, hey, you know what, we are either both being stupid or one is being stupid, or whatever. Hey, let's just get to the point and it really gets you to actually communicate. Cause you don't want to come back the next time too saying we weren't communicating.*

Interestingly, John also recognized that he and Jessica were talking more.

> *I think it just really kind of opened our eyes and that we are talking more. And, even some of the things that we're talking about, is not going to be something that the other person is going to like. It's things that if it was bothering one person, you're telling another person, you know, you can accept things and you can adapt and make things better. So, in every area I think it's improved our communication- our understanding of each other, our intimacy, our closeness... It's kind of like trying to teach a baby to walk.*

John also felt that he and Jessica learned how to "get back to the basics" through their couples counselling experiences.

> *It just brought us back to the basics. You can't have any of that without the two of us. It's basically, in a nutshell; we're the inner ring that holds everything else together. So, it's about us. We have to be more focused and that's what I believe I've taken from it. It's getting back to the basics, being about us, take the good with the bad, not being afraid to say what I want and just being wide open for whatever comes ahead and understanding each other as being different people and accepting each other.*

Both Jessica and Cathy referred to the skills they learned as "tools." For instance, Cathy made the following comments:

> *I do see where he does try and use the tools that he's learned and you know, he'll say, "[Therapist] said we needed to do more of this" and so you do see some improvement there. When you're making conscious decisions, you're thinking about what you needed to do to be different and to improve the communication.*

In discussing some of the specific skills that she learned, Jessica mentioned that she and John are able to stop conflicts from escalating as quickly as they did before and they are resolving issues more often.

> *We actually think before we speak more now or some of the time. And, we actually try to have a conversation more when we're having an issue and try not to let it escalate as far as it would of before. Like, just stopping issues before they get too far, letting it cool off if it needs to or just giving that space if one person or the other needs it. Just respecting each other in that way instead of just getting mad and so forth. So, we're actually finding better ways to deal with the conflict and trying to get on the same page a little bit more with our lives.*

For Patricia, using the skills she learned from education and counselling gave her a new perspective on communication.

> *...And then we've worked through an issue and go, well, that was too easy. Like, how come that never worked before? So, we're finding that all the things that they teach you in classes and things to remember in communication, that if everybody has learned them and is working towards using them, they actually work. So, I think we're finding that, because communication is easy because we're following all those things that we've been taught to do, that we're getting some validation that we were doing it right, we were doing the best we could- not that the other person was wrong, but that it wasn't all us, that we are smart enough, we are able to be compassionate, and to be tolerant of the other person's views, all those things that you question when your marriage is dissolving.*

Cathy indicated that she felt as though Colin learned more from counselling than her, as it was more of a "refresher" for the skills she had learned previously. She then expressed her view about how counselling is an ongoing process and that couples need to get refreshers to be successful.

> *So, yeah, it's important to...and don't think just cause you went once that it's all solved and you never have to go again, you never need a refresher. It goes back to the driving. You got your driver's license when you were 16. It doesn't mean you remember all the rules of the road by the time you were 30 and that's why we have so many fools on the road, because they don't remember the rules that they learned 15 years ago. So, counselling isn't going to work just once. You have to keep going to get refreshers, top-ups, probably is the best solution.*

Therefore, it appears that some of the participants found that learning new skills or "tools" from which to draw upon in future situations was helpful for them. For some of these couples, attending counselling helped them to actually take the time to discuss

issues and to learn how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner. One participant (Cathy) also discussed her view on the importance of refreshing previously-learned skills to continue to put those skills into practice and to update your knowledge about how to communicate more effectively as a couple.

Counselling Barriers.

A short theme that arose for some of the participants was those circumstances that acted as barriers to their couples counselling being totally beneficial and helpful for them. Some of the topics mentioned in this theme were characteristics of the therapist and how the therapy was conducted. Cathy indicated that she felt as though the therapist that she and Colin had did not have enough of a "strong personality" to be able to keep their sessions structured and moving in a forward direction.

> *I think the person that we saw for a few years off and on was, he was ok, but he probably, definitely wasn't the right person. We're both strong personalities, we need someone with a strong personality to reign us in, if you will, when you get, as opposed to someone who's fairly soft and, which is what [Previous Therapist] was, was fairly soft and not really as firm as we needed, someone with a personality like [New Therapist], who is very firm and isn't afraid to say anything that, I think that sort of counselling works a lot better for us when you can be put in your place when you need putting in your place basically and keeping things on track... I think when you have a stronger personality counselling you, then you can make resolutions and you can move forward and it's ok, where you know, you feel like you're going in a forward motion, I think is the more, would be more appropriate and what we need if there's anything that's going to succeed, it's that kind of counselling that's required.*

However, Cathy's experience did not turn her off from counselling. She still advocated counselling, but just stressed that you need to find a therapist that is the right "fit" for you.

> *You gotta be able to acknowledge that counselling's not a bad thing and talking out your problems and having someone professional and if the fit isn't right- go find a better fit. You might get tired of it, but you kinda have to try on more than*

> *one pair of shoes to find a comfortable fit. So, you probably have to try on more than one therapist to find someone that you "click" with and it's not a bad thing just cause it didn't work with the first 10 [laughs] or 2 or 3 or whatever.*

For Rob, he felt as though he and Rebecca were made to "point out each other's faults" and he did not feel like he learned enough tools or skills from couples counselling to improve his communication or his relationship in general.

> *I felt we were made to point out each other's faults and what bothered us in front of each other and I really felt uncomfortable with that. Whereas, I would have preferred something more on the lines of, "Here, this is what you can do to help your relationship." You know? Kinda like the stepfamily course. I liked that. It wasn't kinda like pointing the finger at each other and seeing who was at fault, you know? It was more of a give you some tools to work with.*

Colin also expressed how he felt that his faults were "put on display" in couples counselling. Although he stated that he did not like this, he also found it to be a useful process.

> *I didn't like it because I got told an awful lot that I was wrong! Not that I was wrong, that I was behaving badly, that, you know, I shouldn't be doing some of the things that I'm doing, that, you know, and from that point of view- I know nobody likes to be told those kinds of things. So, was it worth it? Yeah. Was it a good experience? Yes it was. Did I enjoy it? Not particularly. As I'm sure that she didn't enjoy it particularly because what that does is bring your faults and your inadequacies to the forefront and it puts them on display for you and your partner and the therapist to all see at the same time.*

In this brief theme, some of the participants discussed those factors that acted as barriers to their couples counselling experiences. For instance, Cathy felt that her previous therapist did not have a "strong" enough personality to provide couples counselling to she and Colin and she would have preferred a more structured approach. For both Rob and Colin, they felt uncomfortable with the counselling process at times because they felt as thought their faults were "put on display" and they would have

preferred to be provided with some "tools" or skills that they could use in future situations.

Slipping Back into Old Patterns.

Most of the participants identified a theme of being concerned about the effects of their counselling not lasting and they noticed that they sometimes "slipped back into old patterns" of negative communication. The responses in this theme included some of the participants feeling as though they talked more, but did not take enough action to improve their relationship, experiencing a lack of progress in changing the way they communicate, or feeling a need for more ongoing counselling to maintain previous changes. For instance, Cathy made the following comments about feeling as though she and Colin need to do more to improve their relationship:

> *I think there's farther to go. I think we probably both need individual communication courses or help and then there's definitely a need for more together, because we just don't have the bricks to do it ourselves right now. It's a matter of what's in the back of your mind and being able to put it into use on a more consistent basis, instead of just thinking about it afterwards, "Oh well maybe I should have done this different." ... So, it's just not enough and we still need more guidance.*

Colin seemed to have a similar view about their need for more ongoing help.

> *Generally speaking, it didn't last because we would fall back into the same, the same ruts and habits and patterns as we had before. So, while it's at the forefront in your head, it works well... If I'm thinking about the couple communication and it's forefront in my head, that's one thing. I'm not going to say that you necessarily drop it off on purpose, but in 3 months after the honeymoon's over, again, you start falling back into those patterns and ... instead of handling it the way we're supposed to handle it, we also fell back into the same pattern of, "Well you're just being a 'fricken-fracken-racken'" and "Fine! If it's ok for you to do it, it's ok for me to do it!" You know? And you take that sort of "teenage mentality" and run with it, because that's the easiest thing to do. It takes the two of you into my comfort zone. You know? Change is hard.*

For Rebecca, she indicated that she felt it was helpful to talk about their problems, but she felt as though they did not make any forward movement.

> *It was hard. I found myself like, crying a lot and you know, I think that when we both spoke we were still, even though we were saying things that made us angry, we were both respectful of each other in the sessions. Like, I don't know if it was because someone else was in the room or what, but, you know, I mean it was, it was healthy to get it out and have somebody else listen, but, like I said, we came to that impasse where it was like, well we know what's, or we think we know what's wrong, but what do we do about it, kind of thing. I mean, she was really good, but it didn't really help us realize what we need to do either.... So, it was good to talk about those things, but we still kinda feel like we're in the same spot.*

She also talked about how eventually she and Rob would slip back into old negative patterns of behaviour.

> *I guess you just you know, for me anyways, you just kinda stop caring, like about what you're saying, but not always respectful I guess of how the other person might feel because you're just mad, so and it's something that continues to happen, so it's like, well why am I still trying to be polite? It keeps coming up, so you know, I just wanna be angry. So, then eventually we just go back to using the silent treatment and that sets us back even further. I guess it would help if we kept up the counselling on a more regular basis.*

On the other hand, John felt hopeful that he and Jessica would be able to maintain the relationship changes they made as long as they accepted one another for who they were.

> *I think they will maintain overtime. I think what she's got to understand, and I think she does understand, is that what I am, some things you just can't change. And, vice versa for her. But, I think that was the biggest key thing. Not so much the communication but understanding that you can't change everything but you have to learn how to accept certain things and work within that to move on.*

Colin also recognized that he needed to give himself time to become accustomed to using his new communication skills.

> *Keeping up the counselling and workshops will help us, I mean, just not letting it go. You know what I mean? It's been 6 months since I started my own counselling. We're still going to workshops and I'm still going to counselling. So, I'm still self-aware. I suppose eventually it will come naturally, but it doesn't. ...we have to keep working at it to make the effects last.*

Thus, most of the participants were left with feeling as though they were slipping back into their old patterns of behaviour (e.g., name-calling, using the "silent treatment") and that they needed more guidance or ongoing counselling and/or education to assist them. While these participants seemed to be hopeful that they could eventually improve their relationships, they also appeared to have a realistic view of change and maintaining change over time in their relationships.

Impacts of Counselling on Attachment/Closeness.

Four of the women in this study also talked about ways that counselling impacted how close they felt to their partners. Some of the responses for the women included the couples counselling experience giving them hope for the future of their relationships, feeling a reduction in the stress or strain on the relationship, feeling as though they had more opportunities to connect with their partners, and feeling as though their partners valued their relationships. For instance, Jessica discussed how she and John were making a transition from being "two roommates" to "getting back on track" and focusing on their relationship again.

> *With the lack of communication there wasn't much closeness. It felt like two room mates living in the same house. And now we are back to, at least, two friends and parents being in the same house. Now we are working on getting back to the two friends and lovers too. So, we're just slowly working our way back up to what we were slowly, I guess, before all of the kids and chaos- what brought the kids here in the first place.... Getting us back on track, kind of, for us, I think was the biggest thing.*

For Rebecca, she indicated feeling closer to Rob almost instantaneously because his even *agreeing* to going to counselling made her feel like he "valued the relationship."

> *Well, it made me feel good that he was willing, you know, to even agree to go to counselling. It was nothing I had to talk him into. He thought it was a good idea*

> *and you know, and so it shows me that he's interested in, you know, how we raise "mine and ours" together kind of thing. So, it definitely makes me feel like he's placed some value on the relationship.*

She also talked about feeling closer to Rob.

> *We are doing pretty good right now. We haven't had really any silent episodes lately. Yeah, I feel much closer to him and we are being a lot more touchy-feely and affectionate with each other than a long time.*

Sarah also discussed how putting in the effort to the relationship made her feel closer to Sam and made her realize that he is the person for her.

> *We haven't had the easiest trip, that's for sure. My God! The things that we've had to deal with that in a lot of relationships you never have to deal with. You know? We have the combined family and we are so different. You know? But, it's worth the effort and it's worth all the you know, the moments where you think you are gonna pull your hair out and all that kinda stuff... I think we both really learned a lot from each other... and I think it's gonna be again, a "work in progress." I don't think anything is a finished product, you know? Really.*

Both Jessica and Rebecca discussed how going to couples counselling helped them to connect with their partners because they actually *made* the time to communicate. For instance, Jessica offered the following comments:

> *It's actually been good. I think it's given us, the biggest thing is it's given us that time to sit down and be forced to actually address our issues that's, kind of, the biggest thing with us. Petty or not- just to actually sit down and be forced to discuss them.... We're just very different on things that are important right at the moment and so it's the counselling that's given us the time to sit down and actually say how are you doing.... Just the time we had to be together ourselves, going there and being there and talking to each other- something that we just didn't really do in our regular lives.... We didn't make it as important, whereas, with the counselling, it became important.*

Rebecca also mentioned that she and Rob would talk more outside of sessions as well and she would attempt to show him some empathy. However, she was still left with not knowing where to go from there.

> *It seemed like we took more time to talk about things afterwards rather than just, you know, like, if he was drinking, rather than walk by and just stomp off to my room or whatever, you know, I'd say like, you know, "Did you have a bad day?" Do you know what I mean? For a while, it seemed like we could at least talk about the "why," but it didn't really, it didn't really help me understand anything, do you know what I mean? We talked about it, but it didn't help me deal with it any better. I was still upset about it.*

As a result of going through the process of couples counselling, these female participants seemed to experience increased feelings of closeness and attachment to their partners. While this increase may have been a temporary experience for some, it still appeared to make the women feel more valued by their partners and more hopeful about their relationships. It seemed that simply taking the *time* to sit down in a structured environment to discuss their relationships was a helpful process for some of these women. As well, they seemed to feel that the effort they placed into the process of couples counselling was worth it because they improved their relationships and reaffirmed their feelings for their partners.

Summary of Themes

The themes that arose in the area of communication for these participants were broken down into two categories- barriers to communication and effective communication. Some aspects of the communication experience that these couples described having difficulty with included differences in how they perceived situations and their communication styles, not solving conflicts in a constructive manner, avoiding issues rather than dealing with them as they arose, allowing other life areas to interfere with their relationships, previous relationship experiences that interfered with the current relationship, and gender differences that interfered with the communication process. The couples discussed their frustrations with attempting to communicate in a meaningful way,

as well as some of the strategies they used to attempt to work through these issues in order to communication more clearly.

The partners were also aware of what factors were in place when the communication process was happening more smoothly and what behaviours would indicate to them that they were communicating well. Some themes that arose in the effective communication category included having similar beliefs and personalities which made communication easier, feeling safe to communicate openly and freely, having their messages verified through paraphrasing or body language, communicating through physical touch and body language, and having a self-awareness of one's own communication style, as well as a sense of empathy for how one's partner communicates. The couples appeared to be mostly aware of what comprised effective communication and they were also aware of when they made conscious choices to *not* use effective communication practices.

In the area of attachment/feelings of closeness/intimacy, the themes discussed by the participants again began with an indication of what intimacy meant to them and how they knew when they felt closer to their partners. The couples also described some of the barriers to closeness and intimacy and what behaviours (i.e., their own or their partner's behaviours) encouraged those feelings of closeness. Some of the factors that were described by the couples as affecting their experience of intimacy included their own beliefs or their partners' beliefs about intimacy, gender issues, previous romantic attachments, childhood experiences that carried over into their adult romantic relationships, and issues of trust that either contributed to or interfered with intimacy. Again, the couples were aware of their experiences of attachment and intimacy and what

factors contributed to an increased feeling of closeness or distance. They also discussed how their communication practices affected their attachment/intimacy experiences. Sharing openly with one another and spending time together appeared to contribute to stronger attachment and intimacy; whereas, living separate lives and using deception contributed to more distance and a sense of hopelessness about the future of the relationship.

Lastly, the participants shared their couples counselling experiences and the themes that arose for the couples included a description of how different interventions were helpful for their relationships, what areas they gained awareness about regarding their relationship interactions, new skills they learned and old skills they refreshed, what aspects of the couples counselling experience acted as barriers for them, situations where they slipped back into old negative patterns of communication and interaction, as well as how couples counselling affected their attachment and feelings of closeness for one another. Hence, not only did these couples find counselling to be a helpful experience, they also appeared to understand the value of continuing to place effort into their relationships and asking for help when it was necessary.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the communication experiences of partners in distressed intimate relationships, as well as their perspectives of their attachment/intimacy experiences in terms of what makes them feel closer to or more distant from one another. A secondary focus of the study was to explore the participants' experiences of couples counselling/marital therapy to determine what strategies they perceived as being helpful for them.

In the following sections, the findings will be discussed and placed in the context of previous research. First, the demographic information collected will be discussed as it relates to the group of participants in this study. Next, how the findings regarding the concepts of communication, attachment, and couples counselling fit within the existing literature will be discussed. Lastly, implications for counselling couples, considerations of the current study, and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

Demographic Information

There are several demographic characteristics that could have potentially impacted the types of findings that arose among this particular group of participants. As was mentioned in the Method chapter, these participants can be described as white, educated, middle to upper middle class; married/common law couples with both biological and stepchildren. Therefore, it is prudent to keep these characteristics in mind when one is drawing possible conclusions from the data and attempting to place this information into a larger context of the existing literature. One aspect of this group of participants that is particularly unique is the fact that seven of the participants were re-married and living

with blended families/ stepfamilies. It is important to note that second marriages have a higher rate of divorce than first marriages (Statistics Canada, 2007), suggesting that these couples may be more prone to difficulties than those in first marriages.

Understanding the Communication Barriers

In regards to addressing the first research question regarding the experiences of communication for distressed couples, the participants identified a number of communication barriers. The first finding was that differences between the partners with respect to how they perceived situations, their personality styles, and their communication styles sometimes interfered with their ability to communicate effectively. For instance, as noted in previous studies, distressed couples are more likely to have negative and angry interactions, to hear messages more negatively (i.e., in a more angry, critical, and unpleasant manner) than they were intended, and to evaluate the impact of their communications less positively (Aune, 1997; Kelly, Fincham, & Beach, 2003; O'Donahue & Crouch, 1996; Schachter & O'Leary, 1985). Manusov and Koenig (2001) also found that satisfied couples used more relationship-enhancing than distress-maintaining attributions to assign meaning to their spouses' behaviour. For example, these partners explained each other's behaviour in a positive and supportive way, which was congruent with the way they intended to get their messages across. On the other hand, distressed couples tended to explain their spouses' behaviour in negative ways, which was often not congruent with the intentions of the spouse sending the message.

The current group of participants discussed feeling frustrated about having different perceptions regarding such issues as how to manage money, what their priorities were, the roles they played within their families, and not understanding each other's

communication styles. Those couples who have difficulty understanding and interpreting one another's communication style have been found in the literature to have a lower level of relationship stability and satisfaction (Cahn, 1990a; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Such misinterpretations between partners have been attributed to "relational schemata," which contain information based on previous relationship experiences and guide relationship behaviour (Edwards, 1995; Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001). As such, spouses' cognitive and affective reactions to their partners' behaviours influence their own reactions despite the communication quality of the partners' behaviours. As well, Berg-Cross (2001) explained the process whereby both men and women get increasingly frustrated about communicating with someone whose style is different from their own. Therefore, the current couples may be experiencing misperceptions about their spouses based on negative relational schemata, not understanding their spouses' communication style or viewing themselves as acting more positively than their partners.

Having difficulties resolving conflict constructively was another finding from this study that was consistent with existing literature. One of the difficulties the couples in the current study described was that unmanaged feelings interfered with their ability to communicate effectively, particularly when they attempted to communicate when their arousal levels were increased (e.g., increased level of anxiousness or anger). Berg-Cross (1997, 2001) noted that anger in relationships can be "self-imposed," where it emerges when spouses try to be mind readers and believe that the hurtful behaviours of their spouses are related to evil intentions or when the perceived thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of a spouse are contrary to one's expectations. The other type of anger described by Berg-Cross (2001) is "retaliatory," where spouses retaliate with their own

angry feelings when they are the victims of direct or indirect spousal anger. Gottman and Krokoff (1989) reported that three modes of anger expression that did not lead to improved marital satisfaction were defensiveness (e.g., making excuses, denying responsibility), stubbornness, and withdrawal from interacting (stonewalling). Consistent with the current results, Aune (1997) also found that negative emotions (e.g., anger) were considered less appropriate to experience and express than positive emotions in intimate relationships. As well, both abusive couples (e.g., Chandler-Sabourin & Stamp, 1995) and distressed couples (e.g., Schacter & O'Leary, 1985) have been shown to have difficulty expressing their anger to one another, due to becoming more verbally aggressive and having more angry, insulting or demanding interchanges with a lack of resolution. It is possible that the current participants may be uncomfortable with expressing their anger and/or using some dysfunctional tactics while expressing their anger (e.g., stonewalling). As a result, their previous negative experiences with communicating while angry created apprehension regarding their ability to control their arousal levels.

The participants in this study also noted having problems in the following areas of dealing with conflict: power struggles, taking a "time out" when it was appropriate or allowing the other partner to do so, dealing with residual feelings from past confrontations, choosing the wrong timing to bring up an issue, having a lack of resolution in conflicts, and using different styles of dealing with conflict. Particularly for those couples that reported living busy lives, they described a theme of needing to be cognizant of when and how an issue is brought up. Berger (2003) also suggested that timing plays a role in how a couple establishes "common ground" and accumulates

knowledge about one another. Consequently, when couples take into account such factors as alertness and ability to process information, they will be much more likely to construct a "shared reality." As Berger noted, "A fatigued and distracted conversational partner might not be receptive to any request, no matter how strong its arguments and no matter how well it is presented" (p. 281).

Similar to these couples, Storaasli and Markman (1990) have noted the inability of marital partners to cope with their problems and deal with conflict. These authors conclude that how couples cope with their problems is likely more critical than the problems themselves. The participants in this study reported similar experiences, as they indicated that they struggled with how to communicate about their problems in a constructive way and they often did not feel as though their problems were ever resolved. Edwards (1995) pointed out that partners categorize events and situations into scripts when they communicate, such as what constitutes a serious dispute, a "normal" argument, or just two persons "tangoing." Robinson and Blanton (1993) also found that when couples were able to communicate constructively, they were able to avoid possible conflicts and were able to resolve difficulties when they arose. Therefore, it is possible that the current participants not only have difficulty communicating during a conflict, but they also may not be taking steps to avoid potential conflicts by resolving issues as they arise, instead of letting them build up over time. In fact, several of the participants shared that they had a tendency to allow issues to build up and that they could have prevented arguments from occurring if they would have instead dealt with the issues as they arose.

Apparent in the conflict theme was a difference in conflict styles, which led to difficulties for these partners when communicating both during conflicts and in everyday

situations. For instance, some of these partners identified miscommunications as happening when one partner requested to delay discussing an issue and/or when one partner was considerably more verbal than the other. Fletcher (2002) noted that there is general agreement among relationship scientists that the way in which couples deal with the inevitable conflict or problems that crop up in relationships and how they communicate their subsequent thoughts and feelings to one another, is a critical element in determining the success of intimate relationships. Ridley, Wilhelm, and Surra (2001) found that there are several "conflict profiles," such as both partners being either engaged in the conflict or distant from one another, as well as one partner being engaged in the conflict and the other partner distancing from the conflict. Of all the profiles, these authors found that having even one partner within the marriage report a tendency to distance during conflict resulted in lower assessments of the quality of the relationship by both partners.

The demand-withdrawal pattern of conflict that was reported by the current participants has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Heavey et al., 1993; Heavey et al., 1995). A few of the female participants in this study admitted that they attempted to keep the conversations with their partners going so that they could reduce their own levels of anxiety about the situation. However, they eventually found that this was not an effective technique, as their partners withdrew even more at these times, thus exacerbating their feelings of anxiety. Gottman (2005) argued that the demand-withdrawal pattern is a dysfunctional mode of marital conflict, which is predictive of future marital problems, and an increased rate of divorce. Consequently, it may be more

beneficial for marital therapists to address patterns of engagement and distancing in couples first, and explore conflict resolution as a secondary goal.

Choosing avoidance as a coping strategy for dealing with issues also arose as a barrier to communication. Some of the forms of avoidance that the participants described using included not talking about recurring issues, using the "silent treatment" with one another, and being deceptive about one's behaviour. Emmers and Canary (1996) indicated that people respond to uncertainty raising events by engaging in uncertainty reducing strategies, which in turn indicate the extent to which the uncertainty has been reduced and the relationship has been stabilized. Passive behaviours (e.g., doing nothing, giving each other space, avoiding one another, etc.) were found to be ineffective strategies because they did not provide new information, nor did they reduce relationship uncertainty. Therefore, it is possible that the participants experienced avoidance as being a barrier to communication because it did not provide them with any new information or help them work towards resolving their issues.

Consistent with the results of this study, research has shown that using lying and deception to avoid addressing an issue does not work, as people believe that they are more successful in deceiving their partners than they actually are (Boon & McLeod, 2001). Cole (2001) also found that complete disclosure fails to depict the nature of communication between romantic partners and that deception is used more often when people fear an aggressive response. For example, some of the participants from the current study described how they avoided telling their partners certain information because they anticipated an aggressive response from their partners or they wanted to avoid an argument from ensuing. In addition, Cole found that people with avoidant and

anxious attachment styles were more likely to use deception. Deception may help avoidant individuals achieve their goal with regard to increased autonomy and it may allow anxious individuals to appease their romantic partners. Ironically, however, although successful deception may draw a partner closer, it may lead to one's own feelings of decreased intimacy- thus, heightening the relational anxiety that anxiously attached individuals tend to experience.

Another finding among these couples was that external factors such as "spill-over" from work and "baggage" from previous relationships interfered with communicating effectively. In regards to "spill-over" from work, several of the participants discussed having difficulty balancing the roles and responsibilities of their work and family lives, as well as placing the necessary effort into communicating with their partners. Recent research on divorced parents confirmed that finding a balance between work and family is the most important factor in promoting well-being (Bailey, 2007). As well, those parents who were in a new relationship had a higher sense of well-being because they had another adult with whom to share the parenting responsibilities and to support them. Chan and Margolin (1994) also found that spillover from fatigue at work badly affected later moods at home and indicated that the world of work and the domestic world are significantly intertwined. The participants in the current study appeared to be satisfied with the division of household responsibilities, yet some of the participants described certain instances where they had discrepant views regarding the efforts each partner placed into these responsibilities.

Given the fact that most of the couples in this study are in second marriages, it is not surprising that "baggage" from previous relationships acted as a barrier to effective

communication. For instance, some of the participants discussed how certain behaviours their partners exhibited triggered negative feelings from previous intimate relationships and caused them a great deal of conflict and stress. On the other hand, some of the other participants described what they had learned from their previous negative relationship experiences and what they were doing in their current relationships to prevent repeating past mistakes. Brown and Brown (2002) noted that every partner enters a relationship with a set of unspoken expectations, based largely on past experiences and it is those couples that learn from previous errors that are more likely to be successful in their present relationships. In a study of the effects of "baggage" on second wives, results found that such baggage was significantly associated with reporting less marital happiness, thinking about divorce, and wishing that they had not married their current husband (Knox & Zusman, 2001). As well, Faber (2004) noted that many remarried couples are plagued with anxiety that stems from unresolved issues in their previous marriage and the ability to form a healthy satisfying remarriage is dependent upon the resolution of issues with the former spouse. Subsequently, this chronic anxiety might lead to poor problem solving and increased conflict in the relationship. According to Faber, the key to managing this anxiety is linked to one's ability to differentiate the new spouse from the old spouse, particularly when a new spouse acts in a similar manner to the former one. On a positive note, partners in remarriages were found to have more realistic expectations of marriage and they are also more aware of the need to deal with former spouses and stepchildren (Faber, 2004; Knox & Zusman, 2001).

The last barrier to communication that arose for the couples in the current study was gender differences. Some of the participants (both male and female) noticed male

aggression/domination behaviours, stereotypical gendered communication (e.g., men wanting to "fix" the problem and women wanting to have their partner listen to them), and a few couples discussed how they experienced a "reversed gender communication," where they took on the opposite typical gender roles. Martin, Anderson, and Thweatt (1998) demonstrated that communication traits such as aggressiveness, argumentativeness, and "Machiavellianism" (i.e., an attempt to gain power over others through manipulation, winning, and ignoring others' feelings) are negatively related to communication competence, suggesting that these strategies are not effective.

Similar to the results in the current study, the notion that men tend to want to "fix" a problem, whereas women prefer to have their partners simply listen to them so that they can vent is a common one (Berg-Cross, 2001). This particular gender difference may be partially due to the idea that men are socialized to be problem solvers, as well as due to the presence of masculine traits, such as being goal- and achievement-oriented, assertive, and ambitious (Acitelli & Young, 1996; Berg-Cross, 2001). As a result, they may view their partners' venting as "problems to be solved" and separate their emotions from the isolated incident. It is interesting to note that some of the couples in this study actually experienced a "role reversal" in terms of gender stereotyped behaviour (e.g., the male partner being a better listener or more physically affectionate and the female partner requiring more physical and emotional space), reminding us not to make assumptions about gender when working with couples. Instead, factors such as personality, upbringing, and beliefs about communication may play more of a role in communication than one's gender.

Towards Effective Communication

In discussing their communication experiences, the participants were able to identify what communication strategies they used that led to effective communication. The first finding in this area was that the couples could identify what they perceived to be as positive or effective communication. Some of the behaviours that indicated to them that they were engaging in positive communication included: a) talking frequently, b) using more active listening strategies, c) choosing to resolve issues in a constructive manner, d) accepting one another for whom they are, e) being more affectionate, and f) reciprocating positive feelings. The aspects of effective communication identified by these couples are aligned with previous research, which also indicated that open sharing of thoughts and feelings, discussing issues, and listening to the other person's point of view without making assumptions contributed to effective communication (e.g., Edwards, 1995; Manusov & Koenig, 2001; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Research has also shown that attitudes about communication are as important as a couple's ability to communicate in a positive and skillful manner (e.g., Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1996). The fact that these participants have chosen to enter couples counselling to improve their communication skills may be indicative of a positive attitude towards communication.

Along with similarities in personalities, the women in this study reported a similarity between their "core beliefs" or values and their partners' values. Simpson, Fletcher, and Campbell (2001) noted that individuals who believe that certain traits (e.g., laughter and humor) are important features of an ideal relationship should also value a sense of humor in their ideal mates in order to have a successful relationship. Pasley, Kerpelman, and Guilbert (2001) stressed the importance of partners having similar

beliefs, as incongruence in spouses' beliefs can result in complaints and criticism, as well as to activate marital dissatisfaction and instability. These authors purport that people resist information that is inconsistent with their identity and when relationship partners' core beliefs contradict one another, identity disruption occurs and this leads to distancing. As a result, when spouses can no longer connect in meaningful ways, they consciously or subconsciously elect to behave in ways that increase their independence from one another. Conversely, having consistent beliefs, values, and identities help to keep a couple connected and satisfied. It appears as though having consistent beliefs was helpful for some of the women in the current study, as it made their communication effortless in some areas.

Another finding that arose for some of the participants was that they felt safe to communicate and to express themselves freely, and this helped the communication process to flow more smoothly. This finding is not surprising considering the support for a sense of commitment being tied to marital quality and satisfaction (e.g., Acker & Davis, 1992; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Stanley et al., 1999). Alternatively, these participants may feel safe to communicate because they share power. Previous research has repeatedly demonstrated that egalitarian relationships are associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction and the greater the power inequality; the less satisfied the couple (Pollock et al., 1989; Whisman & Jacobson, 1990). As well, Johnson (2003) indicated that improving communication skills per se is less important than the need for comfort and the promotion of the safe emotional engagement and responsiveness that is the basis of a secure bond. Hence, it follows that the current couples indicated that communication was more effective when they felt that sense of safety in expressing themselves freely.

Feeling safe to communicate may also reflect these participants' views that self-disclosure is a positive endeavor. Earlier research on self-disclosure (e.g., Chleune, Rosenfeld, & Waring, 1985) indicated that the disclosure of self-relevant information to one's spouse was positively related to indices of marital satisfaction. As well, these authors showed that nondistressed partners show greater equity and congruence in their disclosure patterns than distressed partners. However, Derlega et al. (1993) and Duck (1999) both stated that early research on self-disclosure too readily assumed "tit for tat" in self-disclosure and suggested too much directness and predictability in the way in which it occurs. The above authors suggested that there is a "norm of reciprocity" in self-disclosure that results in partners matching their disclosures measure for measure, although this tends to wear off as the relationship progresses.

Participants in the current study also described having better communication practices when they felt listened to and heard by their partners through techniques such as paraphrasing, responding back, using body language, and attending to their partners. Using listening skills effectively has been linked to higher levels of intimacy and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Mendenhall et al., 1996; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Sokolski & Hendrick, 1999). The importance of partners feeling listened to and heard can also be contextualized by the idea of congruence in perceptions of communication. For instance, Robinson and Blanton (1993) found that those couples who were more congruent in their perceptions of communication were also likely to feel that their relationship needs had been met. To expand on this, the couples in the current study felt that their communication was more effective when their partners were not only listening to them, but also repeating back the message in a way that was congruent with how it was

sent. As a result, they would feel more understood at these moments and feel that their partners were more attuned to their needs as well. These couples also noted that they had been learning new communication skills in their couples therapy (e.g., how to express their feelings and how to paraphrase their partners' messages). Hence, it makes sense that they noticed an improvement in their couple communication when they were actively using the skills they had learned in therapy.

Lastly, the most common theme that arose in the area of effective communication was having self-awareness of one's own communication style, as well as having empathy for what one's partner may be experiencing in the communication process. In particular, the partners discussed the idea of "taking responsibility for your behaviour" and being aware of how you come across to your partner. Margolin et al. (1985) showed that couples were better at coding the interaction of a stranger couple than an interaction of themselves. Research also shows that spouses have significant discrepancies between how they evaluate themselves and each other in emotional situations (e.g., Guthrie & Noller, 1988; Guthrie & Snyder, 1988). For instance, husbands and wives differed in their appraisals of admitting nervousness, telling personal problems, saying sorry, and showing anger. How each partner responded to one another's intentions in emotional situations was also found to be more important than focusing on specific behaviours. As well, Edwards (1995) also found that partners sometimes adopt a "rhetorically symmetrical design" of interacting where they pathologize each other's behaviour and direct blame, while simultaneously protecting themselves from blame. The notion of applying either situational or dispositional attributions to one's partner may influence the likelihood of that partner's willingness to "take responsibility" for his or her behaviour. To elaborate, it

seems more likely that an individual would assume responsibility for a behaviour that he or she believes is a situational one, rather than an unchangeable trait. In fact, some of the participants in the current study discussed the importance of "separating the behaviour from the person," presumably to focus on the situational behaviour rather than to suggest either partner had a "flawed" character trait.

The Role of Attachment in Communication

To explore the role of attachment in communication, the next research question involved determining what made participants feel closer to or more distant from one another. The participants in this study identified barriers to developing closeness and intimacy, such as arguing, not having their needs met, drifting apart in the relationship, feelings and issues that interfered with intimacy, and avoidance of addressing intimacy issues. These reported findings are consistent with previous research, which indicates that a number of factors influence the construction of attachment representations of a relationship, such as the quality of the current attachment relationship, ongoing interactions, previous experiences with romantic partnerships, individual differences, personality variables, and relationship expectations (Bartholomew, 1994; Crowell & Treboux, 2001; Duck, 1994). As well, Brennan and Bosson (1998) found that those with a secure style of attachment tend to derive self-esteem from socially based sources (e.g., approval and positive regard from others) and to be more open to partner feedback, whereas those with an insecure attachment style derive self-esteem from competence-based sources (e.g., a sense of environmental mastery or self-competence) and are indifferent to partner feedback. Therefore, being more open to partner feedback and having a desire to meet partner needs facilitates a closer bond between the couple.

Not surprisingly then, one barrier to closeness and intimacy that this particular group of participants described included scenarios where their partners did not meet their needs. The situations where this occurred tended to be in relation to feeling as though they were not getting enough affection and/or sex to meet their needs on an ongoing basis. This finding is similar with the demand/withdrawal patterns of interaction that have been described in the literature, where one partner demands that his or her needs be met and the other partner withdraws from meeting those needs (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Heavey et al., 1995). In terms of sexual satisfaction, Larson et al. (1998) have shown that partner empathy and open communication appear to play major roles in women's sexual satisfaction. Malach Pines (1996) also noted that open communication was found to help sustain the emotional and sexual intensity of a relationship because it enables couples to discuss emotionally loaded taboo subjects. As well, Litzinger and Coop Gordon (2005) found that if couples have difficulty communicating but are sexually satisfied, they will experience greater marital satisfaction than if they have a less satisfying sexual relationship. Thus, sexual satisfaction may partially compensate for the negative effects of poor communication on marital satisfaction. It is important to note that the literature on marital distress now clearly identifies lack of emotional engagement and distance as the most significant factor in the development of distress and marital disruption, rather than factors such as angry disagreements or the inability to resolve issues (Johnson, 2004). The fact that the current participants reported distancing themselves for only a short duration (i.e., no more than a day or two) was encouraging, as they likely made an attempt at resolving the issue before it increased in magnitude and, in most cases, they were also able to maintain their emotional connection or attachment bond.

The participants in this study also identified that a) being more open and sharing, b) having more positive communication, c) being attuned to each other's needs, d) challenging each other in a respectful way, e) awareness of mood and environment when connecting, f) giving each other space, and g) re-establishing closeness after a conflict as behaviours that encouraged closeness and connection. These findings are aligned with previous research, which also indicated that open sharing of thoughts and feelings, discussing issues in a positive manner, and listening to the other person's point of view without making assumptions contributed to effective communication and closeness among partners (Edwards, 1995; Manusov & Koenig, 2001; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). As well, the importance of "bonding activities" (e.g., doing things together, helping each other) as mentioned by the current couples are noted in the literature (e.g., Berg-Cross, 1997), both to establish connection and to re-build closeness after a period of distancing (e.g., Emmers & Canary, 1996; Pasley et al., 2001; Johnson, 2004).

The current group of participants discussed the day-to-day interactions that made them feel closer to one another, such as doing errands for each other or talking on the phone. Duck (1999) noted that people often report that routine aspects of daily living and "trivial" interactions are not only necessary for keeping relationships going, but are part of what gets missed when a relationship breaks down and/or ends. Duck also indicated that relationships are deeply affected by disruptions to trivial daily tasks and routines and can create couple conflict that turns into something bigger. In addition, Gottman and Driver (2005) suggested that couples need to work on building their friendships and to become more attentive and mindful of the mundane part of their everyday relationships

when they are just "hanging out," as this is when connection happens and intimacy is strengthened.

Participants in the current study reported feeling less attached during periods of relationship uncertainty when they were employing passive strategies (e.g., distancing or avoiding one another through the "silent treatment"), although the attachment styles of the current participants were not determined. Collins (1996) pointed out that the notion of working models of self and others can affect how partners view uncertainty-raising events. For instance, preoccupied individuals were likely to have more negative views of their partner and a more negative interpretation of events, such as their partner being unresponsive to their needs, not being trustworthy, and purposely rejecting closeness. On the other hand, Collins found that secure adults provided much more positive explanations for their partners, such as having confidence in their partner's love and in the stability of the relationship. Collins and Allard (2001) also noted that one's attachment style might impact how internal working models are activated. For instance, secure adults may be better at integrating cognitive and emotional cues when planning their behaviour, whereas anxious adults may place more emphasis on emotional cues and avoidant adults on cognitive cues.

The current participants discussed how their childhood experiences affected their attachment behaviours in their current relationships. They identified two polar responses, including positive childhood experiences with attachment figures that taught them it was safe to develop attachments or negative experiences with attachment figures that taught them to be "black and white" with trust and intimacy. The notion of childhood attachment experiences being connected with later relationship functioning has been well

documented in the literature (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby 1969; 1973; 1979; Cowan & Cowan, 2001). The above authors noted that attachment patterns are developed in large part by the extent to which children learn that they can rely on their attachment figures and that such patterns show continuity across the life cycle. Siegel (1999) also suggested that early attachment experiences directly affect the development of the brain and affect our ability to develop later attachment relationships and interpersonal connections. As well, Satir (1988) indicated that dysfunctional communication patterns are passed from generation to generation and are learned within the context of the family of origin. Mikulincer and Florian (2001) also demonstrated that working models of attachment become activated when individuals are asked to recall early emotionally-laden experiences; thus, people tend to respond in a manner that is consistent with their memories of how their caretakers resolved conflict and acted in their relationship.

The participants in the current study recalled some childhood experiences and they related them to their behaviour in their current relationships. For several participants, positive experiences made it easier for them to be open to similar experiences in their intimate relationships. Several longitudinal studies (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 2001; Klohnen & Bera, 1998) have also demonstrated that there is a connection between people's attachment relationships with their parents and their subsequent attachment behaviour in romantic relationships. Crowell and Waters (1994) suggested that when children seek a safe haven in their caregivers, but do not receive comfort, they may generalize these experiences to their adulthood and be weary of their partner's ability to be there during times of stress. These authors also stated that one partner must actively teach the other that he or she can be used as a secure base from which the individual can

explore and that this needs to be demonstrated through little examples of dependability that occur frequently, repeatedly, and across a variety of situations. Although there are undoubtedly a number of other factors that would also impact the current participants' ability to develop closeness with their partners, as well as to express emotion and affection (e.g., personality characteristics, previous relationship experiences), it would seem that these individuals are aware of some of the foundational reasons for their struggles in this area.

The last theme that arose in this area was the issue of trusting other people in general vs. trusting one's partner. Some of the men made a distinction between feeling comfortable with developing feelings of closeness and intimacy with their partners, but not wanting to (or not feeling comfortable to) put the effort into getting close to others. They indicated that it was rewarding to invest in their partner/family relationships, but not necessarily personally beneficial to connect with others. This finding is aligned with previous research, which indicates that men rely more heavily on their spouses for social support than do women (Cutrona, 1996). As well, Shumaker and Hill (1991) found that men tend to report the greatest satisfaction from social support as coming from their primary relationships. Other research has shown that low levels of intimacy in men's friendships may be due to childhood peer rejection and neglect or it may reflect gender role norms that equate masculinity with self-reliance, fearlessness, and invulnerability (Noller, Feeney, & Peterson, 2001; Prager, 2000). However, Samter (2003) noted that men value their same-gender friends for the support they provide, they talk to their friends about emotions and problems, and they develop close and intimate bonds with their same-gender friends; they just do so a little bit less than women. Attachment style has also been

shown to vary across relationships (Horppu & Ikonen-Varila, 2001; Ross & Spinner, 2001). These researchers found that the attachment orientations that individuals report in response to specific attachment relationships could be quite different from general attachment orientations. For example, an individual may generally have a secure attachment style in most relationships; yet act in a preoccupied, dismissing, or fearful manner in one or two attachment relationships. Hence, there are a number of reasons as to why the men in the current study may choose to rely more heavily on their female partners for emotional support.

Couples Counselling Experiences

The last area of inquiry in this study focused on exploring the couples counselling experiences to determine the aspects of marital therapy/couples counselling that were perceived as helpful in improving communication and understanding the role of attachment in the participants' relationships. One of the major findings in this area is that the participants described gaining awareness about their relationships through their couples counselling experiences, such as how they are communicating with one another, taking responsibility for how one behaves in the relationship, and gaining insight about interaction patterns. Gaining insight about one's behaviour, as well as how one interacts with others, is one of the cornerstones of person-centered, insight-oriented therapy (Gladding, 2000). General systems theory, which was originated by von Bertalanffy and later expanded upon by Bowen, also focuses on understanding repeated patterns of interpersonal interactions and how the interaction of parts influences the operation of the system as a whole (Gladding, 2000). The current researcher believes that having a

foundation in understanding how one's behaviour impacts a system of functioning (i.e., the couple), is necessary to create an environment where change is possible.

Another reported finding as to what was helpful in their couples counselling experiences was that the participants learned new relational skills, as well as refreshed old ones. For instance, some of the participants discussed "getting back to the basics," having more respect and empathy for one another, resolving conflicts better, and using "I Statements" to take responsibility for their feelings. Both behavioural marital therapy and cognitive therapy for couples has been found to help couples in similar areas, such as resolving conflict, developing empathic listening skills, learning how to use negotiation and compromise, engaging in clear and open communication, and understanding each other's perspective (Gilbert & Shmukler, 1996). As well, when communication skills building components have been added to other marital programs, treatment effects were evident in the areas of improving communication quality (e.g., Caesar, 1993; James, 1991). Improvements in communication have also been linked to improvements in other areas (e.g., sexual relationships) and the relationship as a whole (Caesar, 1993; Cooper & Stoltenberg, 1987).

The existing literature on conducting therapy with remarried couples and stepfamilies also supports using educational interventions that help such clients improve skills. For instance, Rhoden and Pasley (2000) demonstrated that stepfamilies found therapy to be more helpful when they gained specific skills (e.g., communication skills) and that they also responded well to strategies that enhanced their self-esteem and reduced a sense of helplessness. Faber (2004) also recommended addressing the chronic anxiety within remarriages by using the Bowenian "I position," which helps couples to

differentiate between their current and former partner. Stokes and Wampler (2002) also found that whether remarried clients seek marital therapy or family therapy is important because in their study, those remarried clients who sought marital therapy reported higher levels of both marital and psychological distress than those remarried clients who sought family therapy. As well, the remarried clients who sought marital therapy had higher levels of anxiety, hostility, and distorted thinking, which these authors attributed to the impact that ex-spouses and children have on the newly formed union. Therefore, Stokes and Wampler suggested that marital therapists need to help the ex-spouses resolve their emotional ties with the former spouses, while at the same time strengthening the newly-formed union and family.

Another finding in this area included the couples experiencing some barriers that interfered with the helpfulness of therapy. Some of the barriers mentioned included characteristics of the therapist that did not "fit" well with the couple's personality styles and how the therapy was conducted (e.g., not enough structure to the sessions and feeling like they were being "blamed" for their behaviour). Overall, there is growing theoretical and research support for the notion that therapist relationship skills (e.g., warmth) and the positive strength of the therapeutic alliance are important determinants of outcome in systemic and strategic therapies (Browning & Green, 2003). In discussing gender issues in couples therapy, Worden and Drahus Worden (1998) made the following comment: "To function most effectively, a therapist combines masculine and feminine behaviours using the appropriate response at the appropriate time in therapy (p. 54)." These authors pointed out that the therapist's role requires a range of behaviours that may cross gender role and stereotyping, as well as the technique of balancing a warm therapeutic alliance

with objectivity. Vangelisti (1994) also found that marital therapists tend to focus on individual factors (e.g., learned behaviours, self-perceptions), rather than interpersonal and relational factors (e.g., how the couple interacts with one another, how they resolve conflicts) when conceiving and treating the cause of communication problems. Such an individualized approach could have an affect on how effective marital therapy is and how the couple experiences therapy (e.g., one partner may feel "victimized" or as though he or she is solely to blame for the couple's problems).

The participants also talked about sometimes "slipping back into old patterns" of negative communication once the initial effects of couples counselling wore off. They noted that they felt a lack of action, a lack of progress, or a need for more ongoing counselling to maintain previous changes made. Likewise, other research has indicated that while marital therapy focusing on improving communication skills has been shown to be successful in the short-term, the long-term benefits are somewhat unclear (Berg-Cross, 2001; James, 1991; Wampler, 1982). However, Kaiser, Hahlweg, Fehm-Wolfsdorf and Groth (1998) evaluated the efficacy of a cognitive-behavioural program for couples and found long-term effects, in that the couples emitted more positive verbal and nonverbal communication behaviours at a 1-year follow-up period. Interestingly, these authors found that the psychoeducational program worked equally well with either satisfied or distressed couples and both men and women. It appears that when couples are taught how to use concrete skills, they will be more likely to maintain these changes over time. As a result, it appears beneficial for couples counsellors to use a cognitive-behavioural approach that focuses on skill building and provides couples with concrete ideas about how to maintain such changes over time.

Lastly, a theme arose amongst the participants regarding how the couples counselling experiences affected their feelings of attachment and closeness to their partners. The women in this study expressed stronger views in this area, including feeling more hope about the future of their relationships, feeling a reduction in stress, having more opportunities to connect with their partners, and feeling as though their partners valued their relationships. Bobes and Bobes (2005) described the process of instilling hope in marital therapy:

> Hope is believing in the possible. The therapist must rekindle lost hope, identify and name hope that is present but hidden, and create hope when none seems to exist. In order to engage the process of hope in all of its forms, you must collaboratively identify and build up on the previously unrecognized strengths and resources of the couple. (p. 33)

As this particular quote identifies, the experience of couples counselling and attending workshops may have helped the couples to feel more hopeful because they gained insight about their strengths and the positive aspects of their relationship. Bobes and Rothman (2002) described a technique that the therapist can use to create hope in the couple, which includes exploring with the couple what originally attracted them to one another in order to help the couple recall their strengths and re-experience earlier memories. However, it must be noted that the concept of hope remains poorly understood (Morse & Doberneck, 1995). These authors suggest that hope involves both a "realistic" assessment of a threat, and the envisioning of alternative goals, including negative outcomes. Along with this notion was the idea that hope always exists with a threat of failure. In dealing with intimate relationships, the threat of failure can include the ending of the relationship

and/or the dissolution of a marriage. Therefore, it makes sense that these couples felt more hopeful about their relationships once they began working towards their goals and strengthening their connections.

A theme that arose specific to the women in this group of participants was that the couples counselling experience made them realize that their partners valued the relationship and that their partners were committed to them. In turn, they reported feeling closer to them due to this renewed commitment. As mentioned earlier, a sense of commitment has been tied to marital quality and satisfaction (e.g., Acker & Davis, 1992; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Stanley et al., 1999). To add, couples who are able to communicate constructively are also able to avoid possible conflict and resolve difficulties when they arise, thereby maintaining or enhancing the commitment and closeness of their relationship (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Therefore, the finding that couples counselling helped all of the women in this study to feel a stronger level of commitment and to feel more attached to their partners is understandable. The women may have been more conscious of changes they noticed in relation to their feelings of attachment either during or after couples counselling or psychoeducational interventions. Worden and Drahus Worden (1998) outlined the process where couples enter therapy because one member strongly pushes for it and there is a fear of dissolution of the relationship. Then, if therapy is successful, both partners feel an urge to renew their commitment to the relationship.

Implications for Counselling Couples

The findings of the present study have implications for marital therapists working with couples. First, it appears beneficial to help couples to develop concrete

communication skills (e.g., listening, paraphrasing, conflict resolution), as these skills are practical methods the couple can use to improve their communication. In a study of therapists' view of marital problems, communication difficulties were rated as having the most damaging effect on marital relationships and structured communication training was believed to be essential to effective marital therapy (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Several of the participants discussed how they would have liked to gain more "tools" or skills from their couples counselling experiences. Perhaps homework assignments and hands-on approaches would be helpful for couples, as they would be encouraged to work on their relationships out of session and they would have more opportunities to practice their newly-acquired skills. If the couples had a firm base of skills to draw upon, they would therefore be able to utilize them in future confrontations or when communication begins to decline. Therefore, therapists could consider assigning homework to the couples they work with and also find practical ways for the couples to implement their skills into their daily interactions.

Research has confirmed that the long-term benefits of marital therapy are somewhat questionable (e.g., Berg-Cross, 2001; James, 1991; Wampler, 1982) and the couples in this study also reported that they were concerned that their relationship changes would not last for the long-term future. Because the couples reported that they had difficulty maintaining the changes they had made and that they had a tendency to slip back into previous patterns of relationship functioning, therapists should also consider ways that they can help couples develop maintenance strategies to ensure long-term success. Consequently, it is important for therapists to help couples to develop new ways of interacting that can be easily maintained over time. Perhaps a treatment plan could

consist of the couple having follow-up appointments that span over a period of time (e.g., 6 months- 1 year) after the bulk of the marital therapy has been concluded.

It may also be helpful for therapists to include a psychoeducational approach to therapy (e.g., providing handouts, teaching new skills using various adult learning methods) so that couples have concrete information to refer back to in the future when they may be experiencing new difficulties. It is interesting to note that Kaiser et al. (1998) found that a psychoeducational approach worked well with either satisfied or distressed couples, as well as both men and women. To add, the marital changes were maintained at a 1-year follow-up period. Therefore, this approach may be quite versatile and have the potential to be maintained over time. Ideally, therapists should encourage couples to enter therapy before it becomes too late to repair the damage that has been done to the relationship (Kaiser et al.), yet the logistics of this may be complicated. However, if couples workshops and couples counselling in general is marketed and provided in a nonthreatening context, couples may be more likely to participate in it and more relationships and marriages could potentially be saved.

It may be important for therapists to emphasize that the couple is working on a common goal together while in couples counselling. Rabin (1996) noted that those couples who achieve egalitarianism through therapy strive to attain an equal partnership, which forms the basis of marital happiness in contemporary relationships. As was mentioned by the participants in this study, the sense of togetherness they received from participating in couples counselling contributed to an increased feeling of attachment and commitment. For the women especially, it made them feel as though their partners really valued their relationships. As well, the couples indicated that they felt more hopeful about

their relationships once they began to see tangible changes and they saw a possibility of a long-term future together. Therefore, it would be beneficial for marital therapists to help foster hope in couples and to encourage them to renew their commitment to one another in order to provide a secure base from which to address their issues.

Marital therapists/couples counsellors could also improve the counselling experience by informing and educating clients about what to expect from the couples counselling process. As was noted by some of the participants in this study, they experienced feeling like they were "made to point out each other's faults" or that their own negative behaviour was "put on display" for both the therapist and the other partner to see. As such, if marital therapists provide an honest depiction of what to possibly expect while the couple is in counselling, the attrition rate could potentially be lowered and partners would not be surprised or alarmed by feelings they are experiencing or techniques that are used throughout the process. As well, the participants appeared to be somewhat confused about the counselling process at times and they seemed unsure of which direction the therapy was moving. It appeared as though some of the couples would have preferred to have more structure in the sessions and/or to have a different approach or therapeutic style used by the therapist (e.g., a stronger personality). Therefore, marital therapists must continuously evaluate the techniques they are using and honestly determine whether their own therapeutic approach is appropriate for each particular couple. To add, with the knowledge that men tend to be problem-focused and goal-oriented (e.g., Berg-Cross, 2001), it may be necessary to keep the male partner (as well as the female partner) apprised of the goals of therapy and what to expect next in order to improve the outcome of therapy. Rugel (2003) discussed the importance of the therapist

establishing clear and concrete goals with the couple at the beginning of therapy and then subsequently altering the goals as the sessions progress if necessary. Brown and Brown (2002) also suggested that identifying subgoals and objectives help to operationalize larger goals and can be used to measure the couple's progress from week to week. These authors note that operationalizing goals provides direction in the therapy and prevents the therapist from claiming effectiveness without demonstrating it. This approach may help to provide that sense of structure in the therapy sessions that the current participants seemed to be lacking at times.

Another issue that counsellors need to be aware of that may be indicative of the pace of our current society is that of couples needing to learn how to balance their lifestyles and resist the urge to take on too many responsibilities. A few of the couples appeared to be distressed by the amount of responsibilities they were managing and they expressed being concerned about the lack of time and energy they had to devote to their relationships. Therefore, couples may need to learn stress and time management skills in order to prioritize important tasks and to find the time to build their relationships. Chan and Margolin (1994) examined the spillover effects from the work environment to the home environment and found that husbands responded to their wives' work fatigue and negative work moods with increased fatigue in the home. These authors also found that the wives responded to their husbands' work overload with overtly supportive behaviour, such as providing comfort and increased housework. Hence, women may take on extra burdens by focusing on their partners' needs and neglecting their own. As mentioned earlier, other research has shown that regular daily contact that is meaningful often leads to couples feeling more connected (e.g., Duck, 1999) and also to better communication

practices. However, more importantly, the quality of the communication has more impact on the relationship than the quantity of time spent together (Berg-Cross, 1997).

An important finding of this study, along with previous research, is the notion that positive communication often makes couples feel more attached and better about their relationships, whereas negative communication often makes couples feel less attached and to have a negative view about their relationships. Therefore, marital therapists should stress to couples the importance of increasing their positive communicative exchanges (e.g., compliments, praise, positive reinforcement) and minimizing their negative exchanges (e.g., criticisms, put-downs, engaging in destructive conflict). As Gottman et al. (2002) have demonstrated, those couples who begin their marital interactions in a more negative state are more likely to enhance these negative interactions and lose the positive stable state. Therefore, the therapist needs to create small changes in the number of positive interactions the couple engages in to change the overall communication in a positive direction. Gottman (1993) also found that some negative acts were more predictive of marital dissolution than others. For instance, a husband's defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling were predictive of divorce, whereas a wife's criticism, defensiveness, and contempt were predictive of divorce. As such, therapists may need to pay attention to the particular types of negative acts that are being displayed by couples and how gender differences may be playing a role in their communication practices.

To add, therapists may need to help those partners who display an insecure attachment style (e.g., anxious/ambivalent or avoidant according to Bowlby or preoccupied, fearful, or dismissing according to Bartholomew). Similarly, therapists may need to help those who engage in insecure behaviours, regardless of attachment style, to

work towards developing a more secure sense of attachment to their partners. Helping people to make this transition is very important because insecure attachment has been repeatedly linked to marital conflict, dissatisfaction, and divorce (e.g., Collins & Allard, 2001; Davila, 2003; Davis, 1999; Gallo and Smith, 2001). Whiffen (2003) noted that the fundamental problem in distressed couples is attachment insecurity and that this insecurity disrupts key relationships and creates emotional distress and psychopathology for the insecurely attached individual. Hence, Whiffen recommended facilitating a conversation between two partners when one partner is feeling insecure about the attachment. These attachment figures can then be encouraged to take responsibility for their unavailability, to explain how it evolved, and why it occurred. According to Whiffen, such a conversation allows both partners to have empathy for one another (i.e., the insecure individual has empathy for why his or her partner is unavailable, and the unavailable partner has empathy for the impact of his or her behaviour on the insecure individual). Further, Davila (2003) noted that it is not only the insecure people who face the challenges of getting their attachment needs met, but that secure people do as well. Hence, achieving a sense of "felt security" has positive and beneficial effects for people, despite what attachment style may prevail for them.

One type of marital therapy that has been found to be particularly useful in strengthening attachment between partners is that of Emotion-Focused Therapy (Johnson, 1996). This therapy helps to create a secure environment for couples, where the therapist acts as a temporary attachment figure for the insecurely attached individuals (Johnson, 2003, 2004). Then, once the insecurely attached individuals feel more secure, they can have a conversation with their partners about attachment where they can both re-frame

their partners' behaviour and also express their attachment needs more constructively. Johnson (2004) made the following comment: "An appropriate couples intervention would have to pay particular attention to the processing, regulation and integration of affect and it would have to focus explicitly on the creation of a secure bond rather than in other couples interventions such as teaching negotiation skills" (p. 216).

Lastly, due to the nature of this particular group of couples who are largely in remarriages and/or "blended" families, a few suggestions will be made in regards to counselling this population. Michaels (2006) mentioned that in order for stepfamilies to be successful, it is important for clinicians to emphasize the usefulness of pre-marital counselling to help the couples be more proactive in their efforts to successfully merge two families. Some of the participants in this study had attended either pre-marital counselling and/or some type of stepfamily workshop or therapy. Michaels (2006) also suggested that it might be valuable for clinicians to engage all family members in therapy in an effort to strengthen stepfamilies, as a strong couple bond may not be enough to ensure the successful family formation of a stepfamily. Faber (2001) suggested using a Bowen Family Therapy approach, whereby the "emotional system" of the couple is the focus of therapy, rather than focusing on the content of the conversation between partners and problem solving for particular issues. Faber encouraged marital therapists to focus on the emotional processes of the couple, so as to help lower the anxiety partners have in the relationship and to help them develop a better understanding of one another. Rhoden and Pasley (2000) also found that the gender of client, gender of therapist, and gender pairing of client/therapist did not affect level of perceived helpfulness in therapy with stepfamilies. However, these authors stressed the importance of using strategies that

enhance self-esteem, reduce a sense of helplessness, validate feelings, and provide educational intervention, as these aspects of therapy were noted to be the most helpful to stepfamilies. Regardless of the interventions used by the marital therapist though, the literature on stepfamilies would indicate that it is important to consider the unique issues that arise for these particular couples/families.

Considerations of the Study

Some considerations of how the study was conducted will be briefly discussed. First, the couples were interviewed individually and this may have affected the types of responses given, as partner feedback was not included in the interview process. It is possible that if the couples were interviewed together, the researcher could have received very valuable information about how the couple communicated and interacted with one another. Additionally, interviewing couples who are in the earlier stages of their relationship may have generated discussion about different types of communication problems than those who are in later stages of their relationship.

Further, it was not possible to glean information about specific attachment *types*, as has been done in several other research studies. Consequently, it becomes difficult to place this study in the context of those studies that looked more specifically at attachment types than just "feelings of closeness" or "intimacy" in general. However, in keeping with the qualitative approach, the researcher allowed the themes to arise in this area, rather than imposing pre-existing "types" on the couples. As well, in the marital therapy section, no questions were asked about therapist characteristics or the type of marital therapy used. While these questions may have been beyond the scope of this study, such

information would have been useful in determining what makes marital therapy effective and in discussing implications for counselling couples.

Suggestions for Future Research

Some general suggestions for future research regarding communication and attachment in couples have become evident. First, if pursuing a quantitative research design, it would be prudent to include a measure of marital satisfaction to confirm whether couples being measured truly perceive themselves as distressed or non-distressed. In terms of using a qualitative design, interviews could be conducted with partners who perceive their relationships to be healthy/non-distressed. That way, it would be possible to compare how the experiences of the concepts of communication and attachment differ for distressed and non-distressed couples. Whether or not to interview the partners of the couples separately or together is likely dependant on the type of information that is being sought by the researcher and the research method being used. For instance, in using the qualitative techniques of basic interpretive inquiry, phenomenology or grounded theory, separate interviews appear more appropriate; whereas, in using techniques such as discourse analysis and ethnography, interviewing couples together will likely be more suitable because the researcher would be attempting to explore the interaction of the communication process.

Second, in terms of studying the concept of "attachment," it may be helpful for future researchers to clarify the definition of this concept with participants being interviewed. The current researcher encouraged participants to subjectively define concepts of attachment (e.g., closeness, intimacy, trust, dependence) when answering questions in the interviews. It may be beneficial for future researchers to provide a formal

definition to all of the participants to ensure that everyone has a similar understanding of the concept. For instance, Bartholomew's (1990) four-category model could be presented to participants and they could identify which attachment style applies to them and would provide qualitative researchers concrete information about attachment in couples. At the same time, qualitative researchers need to be cautious about imposing previous research on the data and, thus, it would be important to determine what the purpose of the research question is and how to most appropriately glean rich information about such a complex concept.

Third, future research in the area of couple communication could include observational methods, such as videotaping marital interactions and observing couples in their natural environments. Because communication is largely composed of nonverbal behaviour (e.g., Manusov, 1995; O'Donohue & Crouch, 1996), it is important to capture these subtleties in the data and to determine how they are intertwined with verbal behaviour. Such information would help to explain why couples experience perception differences and how they can communicate more clearly in a language that is framed with their partner's communication style in mind. In addition, this information could be used as a psychoeducational learning tool to help distressed couples learn from other distressed couples' interactions.

Finally, Jacobson and Addis (1993) suggested that future research on couple characteristics should include what particular treatments work best for different couples. Furthermore, these authors suggested that more research is needed in the areas of gender issues and domestic violence; which, in turn, could inform treatment development. As was noted in the present study, men and women often play different roles in relationships,

and they may also have differing goals and expectations about relationship scripts and communication in general, which could be important information for marital therapists who work with these types of couples. More recent research on Emotion-Focused Therapy (Johnson, 1996, 2003) has provided strong support for including attachment theory in couple interventions. Therefore, it will be interesting to continue research on these types of interventions to explore more information on what makes them effective. As well, it is also important for future researchers to capture how societal changes (e.g., increased technology that creates changes in how people communicate) affect couple interaction and attitudes toward marital therapy.

Conclusion

The unique aspects of this study involved combining the areas of couple communication and attachment behaviours to determine how partners in distressed couples perceive these concepts as playing a role in their relationships. This qualitative inquiry highlighted the importance of recognizing the extent to which developing and maintaining open and honest communication requires sustained effort and commitment. It is also of key importance for couples to continually evaluate what communication strategies are working or are not working. However, simply having these skills and using them on a continual basis is not enough to create a strong attachment bond between partners. This study demonstrated that it is important for partners to be attuned to each other's needs, to have empathy for one's partner, and to engage in everyday bonding activities to maintain their emotional connections, as well as to provide a basis for a strong relationship foundation. Couples can also benefit greatly from requesting assistance to overcome communication barriers and enhance their attachment. They

appear to respond well to structured approaches that provide them with specific techniques and "tools" that they can rely on in future conflict situations. At times, they may need to re-enter couples therapy after they have already terminated and/or engage in another type of intervention to keep their communication skills current, as well as to provide them with opportunities to re-connect and to foster hope in the future of their relationships.

The findings of the current study suggest that although these couples have had relationship difficulties, they were able to identify both the barriers to effective communication and those factors that invited effective communication into their relationships. The barriers to effective communication that were identified included experiencing miscommunication due to conflicting perceptions and gender issues, an inability to manage difficult emotions, not dealing with conflict constructively (e.g., using avoidance), and spillover and "baggage" from other life areas and previous relationships. What the couples perceived as doing that created an environment for effective communication was having similar values and beliefs, feeling safe to communicate, verifying the message to ensure it was received accurately, connecting through body language and physical touch, having an awareness of one's own communication skills, and having empathy when interpreting the messages and behaviour of one's partner.

The participants were able to identify the barriers to achieving closeness and intimacy, along with those behaviours that encouraged closeness and intimacy. The barriers included arguing, not having their needs met, drifting apart in the relationship, feelings and issues that interfered with intimacy, and avoidance of addressing intimacy gaps. On the other hand, the behaviours that made the participants feel closer and more

connected to their partners were being more open and sharing more with each other, having more positive communication, being attuned to each other's needs, challenging each other in a respectful way, awareness of mood and environment, giving each other space, and re-establishing closeness after an argument or a period of distancing. Along with these findings, other factors that impacted the partners' attachment to one another included the following: beliefs about intimacy, gender issues in regards to intimacy, previous romantic attachments, childhood experiences of attachment, and developing trust of one's partner and others.

Helpful aspects of the couples counselling process included gaining awareness about the relationship, developing improved communication skills and refreshing previously-established skills, and feeling closer to one another and more hopeful about their relationships. Some unhelpful aspects of the couples counselling experiences that did not create an effective atmosphere for relationship behaviour change included characteristics of the therapist and the way that therapy was conducted. In particular, some of the participants did not like feeling as though their faults were "put on display" and they also preferred more structured approaches that provided them with specific techniques or "tools" with which to improve their relationships.

Overall, the findings of the present study were similar to past research and also enlightened marital therapists about how couple communication is so intricately intertwined with the concept of adult attachment/intimacy. As well, because most of the participants in this study were in second marriages, they reported a number of issues that may be specific to this population (e.g., previous unresolved emotional issues and dealing with ex-spouses and stepchildren). Therefore, the current study has exciting implications

for marital therapists working with couples who have been having communication difficulties, as well as remarried couples in blended family situations. It also expands the marital therapy literature by offering some ideas as to how the concepts of communication and attachment impact one another and how certain aspects of the therapy process are or are not beneficial for couples in distressed intimate relationships. Certainly, there are many complex individual and dyadic factors to consider when engaging in marital therapy with couples. It is with great hope and desire that this study will provide marital therapists with a renewed inspiration to more fully address the essence of the communication and attachment experiences in couples.

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Appendix A

Letter of Information for Participants

Communication Patterns in Intimate Relationships:
An Attachment Perspective

My name is Andrea Dwyer and I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. I am currently conducting research on communication patterns in intimate relationships. I would like to invite you to participate in this research.

Information for this research will be collected through two steps. The first step includes you filling out a short demographic information form and the second step includes an audiotaped individual interview with you. It will take approximately 1 to 2 hours to complete both components of this research.

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information that could identify you will be used. The information gathered from this study will remain in a locked filing cabinet and it will be destroyed after a span of five years. There will be no names used in the study, rather participants will be assigned code names. The results of this study may be presented verbally or published in written form, yet no identifying information will be included.

Should you consent to participate in this research, please be aware that you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or to decline to answer any specific questions you would prefer not to answer. You also have the right to discuss personal information you feel comfortable disclosing and to withhold any information you wish to maintain private.

Some individuals may find some of the questions to be of a sensitive nature. If you feel that you would like to speak to a counsellor regarding any issues that arise as a result of this study, please refer to the list of counselling agencies provided to you and/or you may contact the researcher at 492-3746 to obtain a referral for counselling.

If you have any questions about this research, or any comments to make now or at a later date, please contact the researcher at the above number. If you would like a summary of the results of this study, contact Dr. Len Stewin in September 2007 at 492-5245.

Andrea Dwyer
Ph.D. (Counselling Psychology) Program

Appendix B

Consent Form

Communication Patterns in Intimate Relationships: An Attachment Perspective

Researcher: Andrea Dwyer, Ph.D. Candidate
Deparment of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta
Phone: 492-3746

Supervisor: Dr. Len Stewin, Chair, Educational Psychology
Department of Educational Psychology

I have read the Letter of Information relating to the above-titled project, I understand the proposed research, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that I may agree to be audiotaped during the interview process and that my name or identity will not be recorded. Code names will be used to preserve my anonymity.

I understand that participation in this study is voluntary, that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without incurring a penalty of any kind, that I may decline to answer any specific questions should I choose to do so, and that the information collected is for research purposes only.

I consent to participate in this study.

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____ Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please complete the following information:

1) Age: _____

2) Gender: _____

3) Ethnicity: _____

4) Highest Level of Education Obtained: _____

5) Occupation: _____

6) Personal Annual Income: _____

7) Total Household Annual Income: _____

8) Length of Time in Your Current Relationship: _____

9) Are you married? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, how long: _____

10) Have you ever been married, divorced, or widowed before?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please explain:

_____

_____

11) Do you have children? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, how many from the current relationship?

Boys _____ Girls _____

How many from the past relationship (s)?

Boys _____ Girls _____

12) Would you be willing to be contacted at a later date to read over a summary of the interview and provide any additions or clarifications?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please provide the following information to be contacted:

Name _____

Phone Number _____

Email Address _____

Appendix D

Interview Guide

Communication:

1. Tell me about the communication between you and your partner. (What forms of communication do you use?... Can you give me some examples?)
2. How does body language and non-verbal communication play a part in your communication as a couple? (e.g., voice tone, gestures, posture, eye contact, etc.)
3. What communication problems do you and your partner have? (What makes that a problem?…Why is that a problem?...Can you give me an example of an ongoing problem?)
4. How do you and your partner handle conflict?
5. What makes communication effective between you and your partner? (Why does that work for you and your partner?…How do you know it's effective?)
6. How do you know you are being listened to and heard by your partner?
7. How do you know your message is getting across as it was intended (e.g., accurately)?
8. What have you learned about the way that your partner communicates?
9. How does your communication as a couple impact your sexual satisfaction?
10. How does gender impact your communication as a couple?

Attachment:

1. How comfortable are you with developing feelings of closeness and intimacy towards others?

2. How do you think you came to have those ideas about closeness and intimacy?

3. What is it like for you to depend on/trust others?

4. What is it like for you to depend on/trust your partner?

5. In what ways do you depend on or trust your partner?

6. Tell me about your feelings of closeness and intimacy towards your partner.

7. What do you think affects your feelings of closeness and intimacy towards your partner? (What makes your feelings of closeness change or fluctuate?...Do you feel closer to or more distant from your partner at particular times?)

8. How does your desire/level of comfort with closeness and intimacy coincide with your partner's? (Does this make you feel like you're on the same page or a different page? Does this create problems for you in your relationship?)

9. What do you think you learned about being able to trust/depend on others, as well as your partner, from your childhood? (Can you give me some examples? How close were your parents to one another? How did they depend on each other? What impressions did you have about the level of trust in their relationship?)

10. How do you think your previous intimate/romantic relationships impact your ability to depend on/get close to your partner?

Communication and Attachment Combined:

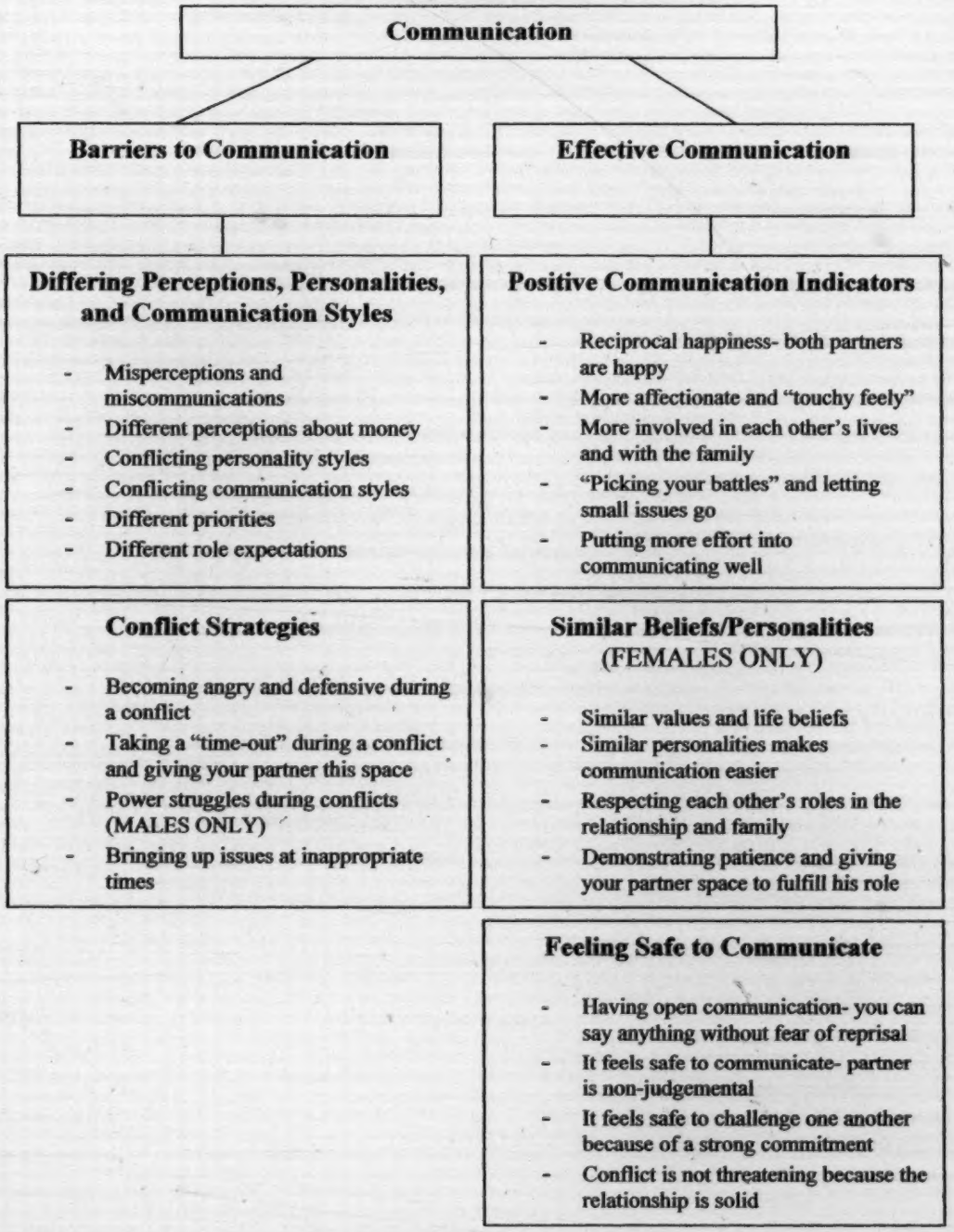
1. What do you notice about your communication with your partner depending on how close you feel to him/her? (What do you notice that is different about your communication depending on your level of closeness at the time?)
2. How do differences in your level of comfort with closeness/intimacy and your partner's level of comfort with closeness/intimacy impact your communication as a couple?

Marital Therapy:

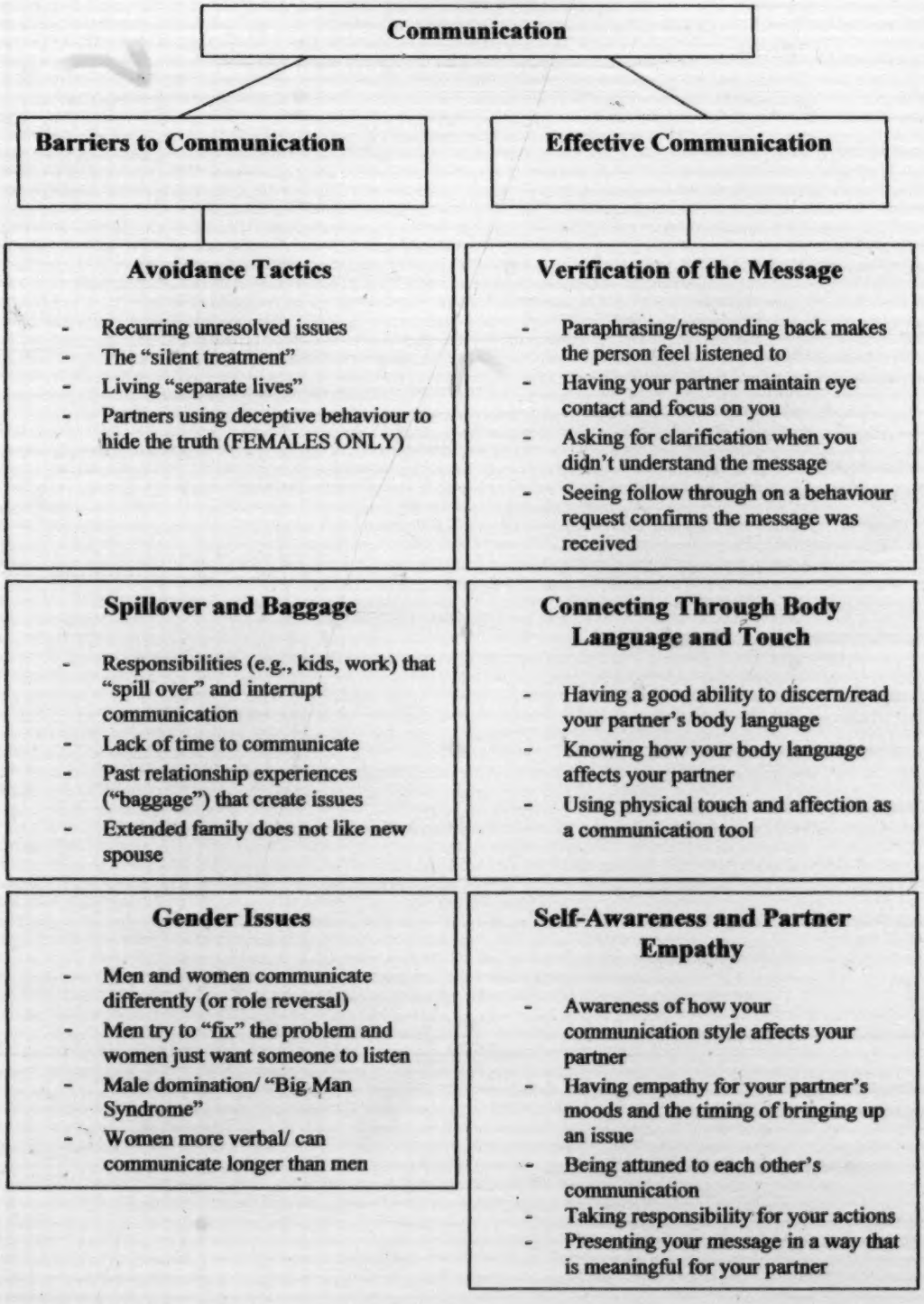
1. How many sessions of marital therapy did you attend and/or what marital therapy workshop/program did you attend? (How many more sessions do you anticipate attending?)
2. Tell me about your experience of marital therapy/couples counselling.
3. How did participating in marital therapy impact your communication skills? If your communication as a couple improved, in what ways did it improve? (Can you give me some examples about how your communication as a couple has changed/improved?)
4. How did participating in marital therapy impact your feelings of closeness to your partner? (What has contributed to that change?)

Appendix E

Flow Chart Depicting Thematic Analysis


Communication
Barriers to Communication
Effective Communication
Differing Perceptions, Personalities, and Communication Styles
- Misperceptions and miscommunications
- Different perceptions about money
- Conflicting personality styles
- Conflicting communication styles
- Different priorities
- Different role expectations
Positive Communication Indicators
- Reciprocal happiness- both partners are happy
- More affectionate and "touchy feely"
- More involved in each other's lives and with the family
- "Picking your battles" and letting small issues go
- Putting more effort into communicating well
Conflict Strategies
- Becoming angry and defensive during a conflict
- Taking a "time-out" during a conflict and giving your partner this space
- Power struggles during conflicts (MALES ONLY)
- Bringing up issues at inappropriate times
Similar Beliefs/Personalities
(FEMALES ONLY)
- Similar values and life beliefs
- Similar personalities makes communication easier
- Respecting each other's roles in the relationship and family
- Demonstrating patience and giving your partner space to fulfill his role
Feeling Safe to Communicate
- Having open communication- you can say anything without fear of reprisal
- It feels safe to communicate- partner is non-judgemental
- It feels safe to challenge one another because of a strong commitment
- Conflict is not threatening because the relationship is solid

Flow Chart Continued


Communication
Barriers to Communication
Effective Communication
Avoidance Tactics
- Recurring unresolved issues
- The "silent treatment"
- Living "separate lives"
- Partners using deceptive behaviour to hide the truth (FEMALES ONLY)
Verification of the Message
- Paraphrasing/responding back makes the person feel listened to
- Having your partner maintain eye contact and focus on you
- Asking for clarification when you didn't understand the message
- Seeing follow through on a behaviour request confirms the message was received
Spillover and Baggage
- Responsibilities (e.g., kids, work) that "spill over" and interrupt communication
- Lack of time to communicate
- Past relationship experiences ("baggage") that create issues
- Extended family does not like new spouse
Connecting Through Body Language and Touch
- Having a good ability to discern/read your partner's body language
- Knowing how your body language affects your partner
- Using physical touch and affection as a communication tool
Gender Issues
- Men and women communicate differently (or role reversal)
- Men try to "fix" the problem and women just want someone to listen
- Male domination/ "Big Man Syndrome"
- Women more verbal/ can communicate longer than men
Self-Awareness and Partner Empathy
- Awareness of how your communication style affects your partner
- Having empathy for your partner's moods and the timing of bringing up an issue
- Being attuned to each other's communication
- Taking responsibility for your actions
- Presenting your message in a way that is meaningful for your partner

Flow Chart Continued

Attachment

Defining Intimacy

- Being very honest with one another
- Understanding and acceptance of each other's differences
- Giving each other space to have your own interests and hobbies
- Showing affection for one another and connecting sexually
- Being able to talk about anything and openly sharing feelings
- Being connected in many ways (e.g., physically, emotionally, spiritually)

Barriers to Closeness/Intimacy

- Avoidance of addressing intimacy issues
- Not enough time or energy for intimacy or sex
- Not talking or having little interaction
- Not being affectionate enough or a lack of physical touch
- Missing the cues to engage in intimacy
- Being treated like a child/being demeaned by partner
- Not being responsive enough to each other's needs

Behaviours That Encourage Closeness and Connection

- Spending quality time together as a couple
- Talking more and openly sharing thoughts/feelings
- Being helpful and giving to your partner
- Being attuned to and meeting each other's needs
- Challenging each other as a means of support
- Doing small things that make you feel connected
- Being there for each other during crises/stressful times
- Demonstrating a strong commitment level

Beliefs About Intimacy

- Showing people you care in a number of ways (i.e., not just through physical affection)
- "Detached attachment"- having a healthy balance between closeness and distance
- It is important that you come together at the "right time" in your lives
- Being more comfortable with giving affection than receiving it
- What it takes to feel satisfied with intimacy level (e.g., friend and partner)
- Understanding that intimacy changes during different relationship stages

Flow Chart Continued

Attachment

Gender Issues with Intimacy

- Rescuing behaviour or "White Knight Syndrome"
- Male aggression behaviour or being afraid of appearing "weak," which inhibits intimacy
- Men more likely to be able to have sex during a conflict, whereas the women need harmony and emotional intimacy to create physical intimacy
- Role reversal in regards to sexual drive/desire (i.e., female drive is higher, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction)

Previous Romantic Attachments

- Learned what worked and what did not work from previous relationships
- Have a better idea now of what an appropriate partner is for them
- Learned to trust their own instincts more
- Previous relationship experiences made intimacy easier/harder in current relationship
- More cynical or realistic about what it takes to make a relationship/intimacy work

Childhood Experiences

- Childhood taught some that it is ok/safe to trust and depend on people
- Family was close, with a lot of physical affection and caring
- Childhood taught some to have black and white thinking about trust
- Childhood taught some to be over-responsible and independent
- They can see how some of their relationship behaviours may be related to their childhood experiences or observing their parents' relationships

Trusting Partner vs. Trusting Others

- Similar amount of trust for partners and others (FEMALES ONLY)
- E.g., Trusts partner and trusts others unless there is a reason not to trust; has trouble trusting partner, as well as others
- Can trust partners, but not others as easily (MALES ONLY)
- E.g., Would prefer trusting and opening up to partner, does not let others into the "inner circle that easily, may trust partner too much at times

Flow Chart Continued

Couples Counselling

Interventions to Help the Relationship

- Attended couples counselling for varying lengths of time
- Attended couple communication and blended family workshops/courses
- Completed personal development and academic courses that indirectly influenced their communication/relationship functioning
- Some participants attended individual counselling along with couples counselling and found that this benefitted the relationship as well

Gaining Awareness about the Relationship

- Gained awareness about communication styles and problems
- Gained insight about patterns of interaction in their relationships
- Learned that they need to take responsibility for their actions in the relationship
- Some partners felt that they were modelling "appropriate" behaviour for their partners and kids

Learning New Skills and Refreshing Old Skills

- Attending counselling gave them the "tools" and skills they needed to improve their communication and their relationships
- Counselling made them "get back to the basics" and to refresh old skills they had previously
- Some of the skills they learned included: better ways to deal with conflict, being more respectful of one another, giving each other space, and not escalating as quickly with their emotions
- Their skills improved because they increased the amount of their communication and had more opportunities to practice their skills

Flow Chart Continued

Couples Counselling

Counselling Barriers

- They did not like having their "faults on display" and having to identify their partners' shortcomings
- Some participants did not connect with their therapist- would have preferred a therapist with a stronger personality to intervene more
- Some participants would have preferred a more structured approach with more direction and clearer goals
- Some participants would have liked to learn more skills and "tools" than they did so that they could refer to these skills in the future

Slipping Back into Old Patterns

- The results of counselling did not last as long as they would have liked because they slipped back into the same "ruts," habits, and patterns
- It was good to get their feelings out, but they felt as though they were in the same position with their relationship after counselling ended
- They realized they needed to attend counselling on a more consistent basis in order to maintain the changes they have made
- They realized that you have to accept your partner for who they are and learn to work from there to improve the relationship

Impacts of Counselling on Attachment/Closeness
(FEMALES ONLY)

- The women felt closer to their partners after couples counselling, felt as though they were "back on track" with their relationships
- Counselling helped them to connect with their partners on a more regular basis because they had a scheduled time to talk about their relationships
- Counselling was worth the effort because they were able to express their feelings to their partners and this brought the women closer to their partners
- Counselling gave them a sense of hope about their partners' commitment level and that their relationships would continue to improve in the future